

Democratization



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Since the creation of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960, Venezuela established diplomatic and economic relations with several countries in the Middle East¹ based on a shared interest: oil production². However, the intensification of relations with these countries so distant from Venezuela evolved into two important stages during the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century.

The first stage responds to the foreign policy established between 1958 and 1998, which emphasized principles such as solidarity and cooperation with developing countries; the principle of non-intervention; and the defense and promotion of democracy among nations. These principles characterized the Venezuelan foreign policy conditioned by the internal situation,

1 In this essay, the Middle East includes Persian Gulf countries and comprises Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Syria, Turkey and Yemen.

2 It must be considered that beyond the shared interest between the governments of Venezuela and several governments of Middle Eastern countries, the historical links between nations date back to, at least, the 19th century onwards with significant and different migratory waves of Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians and Turks to Venezuela.

the criteria contained in the National Constitution of 1961, and the international dynamics of the Cold War and post-Cold War³. During this stage, the Middle East was an important region for Venezuela due to its international oil policy and its objective of defending the strengthening and development of developing countries⁴.

The second stage occurs after 1999 under the government of Hugo Chávez, during which bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Middle Eastern countries occupied an important place in Venezuela for various reasons. Some of those reasons are shared ideologies; an anti-American speech; counteracting neoliberalism and capitalism through aligned positions in multilateral instances; attempting to overcome underdevelopment; strengthening relations with groups of developing countries through South-South exchange; and establishing relations of solidarity between peoples.

In the following pages, this second stage of Venezuelan foreign policy will be discussed, as well as two points of interest to understand the relations between the so-called Bolivarian Revolution with countries of the Middle East. Firstly, the elements that underlie the narrowing of this relationship between Venezuela and the Middle East. Secondly, how these elements were materialized through different means and instruments. In this section, the analysis focuses on understanding which countries have been important to Venezuela and why, and which geostrategic sectors have been important in this relationship between Venezuela and Middle Eastern countries. Finally, a

3 See María Teresa Romero, *Política Exterior Venezolana. El Proyecto Democrático, 1958-1998*, El Nacional, 2002.

4 See Demetrio Boersner, *Venezuela frente a la Geopolítica de Asia Occidental y el Norte de África*. ILDIS, 2012.

conclusion is reached, emphasizing the current state of this relationship and the differences in Venezuelan foreign policy today compared to the previous ones in reference to the Middle East region. The analysis presented in this essay aims to contribute to the discussion about the importance that the Middle East has had for the so-called Bolivarian Revolution.

I. Elements that marked the relations between Venezuela and the Middle East from 1999

As of 1999, the foreign policy of the so-called “Fifth Republic” or “Bolivarian Revolution”⁵ progressively began a transition to a new foreign policy model, which consolidated itself after 2004⁶. Hugo Chávez shaped Venezuelan foreign policy and all political initiatives carried out towards other nations, both in Latin America and with nations in more distant geographic regions. This became more evident after his brief removal from office in April 2002 and after winning the recall referendum in August 2004. On the one hand, relations between the United States and Venezuela became more conflictive. On the other hand, Venezuela’s relations with other developing nations became more dynamic and stronger. In particular, the most important elements that defined Hugo Chávez’s policy towards the Middle East were (1) the precepts of Arab socialism and the non-aligned movement; (2) the Palestinian cause; (3) oil; and (4) anti-imperialism.

5 See Daniel Mora Brito, “La política exterior de Hugo Chávez en tres actos (1998-2004)”, *Aldea Mundo* 8, no. 16 (2004): 76-85; and Serbin, Andrés, and Andrei Serbin Pont, “Quince años de política exterior bolivariana: ¿entre el soft-balancing y la militarización?”, *Pensamiento propio* 19, no. 39 (2014): 287-326.

6 See Carlos A. Romero, “Dos etapas en la política exterior de Venezuela”. *Politeia* 30 (2003): 319-343; Urrutia, Edmundo González, “Las dos etapas de la política exterior de Chávez”, *Nueva Sociedad* 205 (2006): 159-171.

Arab socialism and the Non-Aligned Movement

Among some of the variables to take into consideration when evaluating the relationship of the government of Hugo Chávez with a large part of the countries of the Islamic world, the ideologies and the promotion of leaders that dominated the Arab regional scene in the middle of the 20th century stand out. For example, Gamal Abdel Nasser and his project of Arab socialism in Egypt.

In reference to Egypt, Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo, Venezuelan founder of the OPEC, recalled in 1966⁷ the firmness with which Gamal Abdel Nasser opposed the power of England and other countries after the nationalization of the Suez Canal, and how Egypt was able to demonstrate to other developing countries its power to control its own resources. The example of Nasser would serve in Latin America, according to Pérez Alfonzo, to work on the possibility of developing nations to liberate themselves economically from the centers of power, such as the United States, Western Europe and the Soviet Union.

The notion of socialism was viewed as a socio-economic practice that was perfectly compatible with Islam. However, parallel to this option was the revolutionary path crystallized in the Algerian National Charter of 1964 or in the Tripoli Program of 1962, addressing not only the assumption of socialism but also the commitment to leave behind the option of reformism to commit to the social revolution.

During the 1960s, the movement of Non-Aligned Countries (NAM) was formed. This movement sought to establish a position

⁷ See Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo, "Organización de Países Exportadores de Petróleo (OPEP)", *Política: Ideas para una América Nueva* 45 (1966): 8-9.

different from that of the United States and the Soviet Union as well as to be considered relevant actors of the international community⁸. However, in the 1990s, the movement had to face a unipolar world in which the United States and the capitalist model were the engine to re-drive and analyze the role of the movement.

Starting in 1999, Chávez revived the historical connection between the Arab world and Latin America, as well as Nasser's ideals of Arab socialism and the reactivation of relations between Venezuela and other countries on the South-South axis. In the National Economic and Social Development Plan (2000-2007)⁹, created in the first years of his government, it is stipulated that

The strengthening of relations between the Latin American, African and Asian countries will be possible to the extent that the bodies of consultation and agreement, such as the G-15, the G-77, the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, and the Rio Group perfect their mechanisms of action. Venezuela will offer strong support to make this possible.

It is from then on that Chávez had a greater role on the international scene and a rapprochement with developing countries in the Middle East as well as in Africa and Latin America. In 2002, Hugo Chávez assumed the presidency of the Group of 77. He expressed his solidarity with countries such as Iraq and Iran before multilateral bodies such as the United Nations Human Rights Commission, and he rejected sanctions against Iran for

8 See Carlos E. Pérez Llana, "América Latina y los países no alineados", *Estudios Internacionales* (1973): 43-65.

9 See Ministerio del Poder Popular de Planificación. República Bolivariana de Venezuela, September 2001. <http://www.mppp.gob.ve/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Plan-de-la-Naci%C3%B3n-2001-2007.pdf> (Author's translation).

its nuclear program. These alliances and the activism of Hugo Chávez with NAM countries between 1999 and 2013 procured Nicolás Maduro the presidency of the organization during the summit of the movement that took place in Venezuela in 2016.

The Palestinian Cause

The history of the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis would take many pages and an additional essay to understand the nuances and positions of each party to the conflict. Over time, a peaceful and practical solution to the conflict has been made impossible for various reasons. The truth is that the difficulty of creating (and recognizing) a Palestinian State is what has led countries like Venezuela to ally and defend the Arab-Palestinian cause. As early as the 1990s, several Latin American governments decided to normalize their relations with both Israel and Palestine. But it was not until the 2000s that Venezuela openly used the Palestinian cause as an element of its foreign policy to counter its relationship with the United States and reach out to important allies in the Middle East.

In this regard, Hugo Chávez decided to host and promote relations and cooperation of the Palestinian National Authority in the country and in Latin America, to the detriment, in parallel, of relations with the State of Israel¹⁰. This defense of the Palestinian

¹⁰ Venezuela and the Palestinian National Authority formalized the establishment of diplomatic relations with the establishment of a Palestinian legation in Caracas in 2009. This occurred after the expulsion of the Israeli diplomatic corps in Caracas, following the events that occurred in the Gaza Strip in December 2008-January 2009. Israel also expelled, as a reciprocal measure, the Venezuelan diplomatic corps accredited in Tel Aviv.

cause lead Venezuela to experience anti-Semitic incidents¹¹ starting from 2004 that began with the harassment of people from the Jewish community in the country. Internationally, Chávez condemned the actions of Israel and the United States, and strengthened his commitment to Palestine starting from 2009 during the conflict in the Gaza Strip. For example, Chávez accused Israel of genocide in the Gaza Strip. That same year, Israel and Venezuela severed diplomatic relations and Venezuela established new ones with Palestine in April. Between 2008 and 2013, Venezuela, along with more than fifteen Latin American countries, recognized Palestine as a State.

Oil

The strategy of ensuring large inflows of money from oil was fundamental in Venezuelan foreign policy, not only because of the political capital that it generated for the government internationally, but also because of the large profits that resulted in ensuring social programs or missions domestically. In the Simón Bolívar National Project 2007-2013, OPEC constitutes a point of interest for the government's international geopolitics, emphasizing the objectives of strengthening ties with the organization's countries, expanding commercial and technological exchange with the Middle East region, and increasing relations with other oil-exporting countries¹². This is how Chávez undertook

11 See Margarita Figueroa Sepúlveda, "La emergencia y aumento del antisemitismo en los gobiernos de Hugo Chávez y su relación con la profundización de las relaciones entre Venezuela e Irán (2005-2013)", *Revista de Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad* 13, no. 1 (2018): 239-268.

12 Proyecto Nacional Simón Bolívar. Líneas Generales del Plan de Desarrollo Económico y Social de la Nación. 2007-2013. (2009). Sección VII Nueva Geopolítica Internacional. Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación y la Información. Caracas, Venezuela.

a presidential tour in 2000 through at least nine OPEC member countries to exchange ideas and seek support for OPEC in order to assume a more political role.

However, the idea of catapulting Venezuela as a country-energy power with global influence, supported by the country's energy reserves, was an idea only visible in the context of Latin American and Caribbean integration; the alliances with some countries in the Middle East and Africa did not truly serve that purpose. What was in fact promoted with countries like Iran or Libya was the consolidation of common positions in international organizations and the unsuccessful attempt to create parallel instances that would allow breaking with certain hegemonic nuclei, including OPEC. Likewise, Chávez's idea of politicizing OPEC did not materialize due to the rejection of other members of the organization, such as Saudi Arabia.

Anti-imperialism

The structure of Chávez's foreign policy with the Middle East focused largely on the critique of the neoliberal globalization model, the capitalist system, the unipolar international structure and the role that the United States plays in the international system¹³. However, anti-imperialist ideas are not new, nor were they born with Hugo Chávez. By the mid-1950s, countries like Egypt led an anti-Western front, rejecting allies such as Israel while supporting the Palestinian cause and Arab nationalism.

13 It should be noted that autonomy with respect to the United States is not a new objective in Venezuelan foreign policy. See Daniel Mora Brito, "La política exterior de Hugo Chávez en tres actos (1998-2004)", *Aldea Mundo* 8, no. 16 (2004): 76-85; Carlos A. Romero, "Venezuela: su política exterior y el Caribe", *Revista venezolana de economía y ciencias sociales* 10, no. 3 (2004): 243-259.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the weakening of the unipolar hegemony of the United States in the early 2000s, critical voices and anti-imperialist doctrines and symbols re-emerged. This included several leftist governments in Latin America¹⁴ and regimes in the Middle East. During this stage, the Chávez government allied itself with ideologically similar rulers and began to criticize not only the position of the United States in the global scene but also states like Israel. This was an important contrast to the foreign policy prior to 1998 since Venezuela was initially one of the countries that favored the creation of the State of Israel and then went on to maintain a position of impartiality in multilateral bodies such as the United Nations in reference to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The Chávez government was not the only one to reject Israel's positions and existence. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) threatened Israel's territorial integrity and cast doubt on the veracity of the Holocaust.

Based on this anti-imperialist element, the government of Hugo Chávez used frequent confrontations both rhetorical and practical towards the United States, particularly after 2003¹⁵. For example, rejecting the then-President Bill Clinton's offer to help during the December 1999 floods in the Vargas state, the FTAA project promoted by the United States at the Summit of the Americas in Quebec (2001), and the flight of North American planes in Venezuelan airspace as well as the possibility of establishing a US base on the border with Colombia; cataloging the then US president, George W. Bush, as a terrorist; and finally

14 See Soledad Stoessel, "Giro a la izquierda en la América Latina del siglo XXI", *POLIS Revista Latinoamericana*, no 39 (2014).

15 See Steve Ellner, "La política exterior del gobierno de Chávez: la retórica chavista y los asuntos sustanciales", *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales* 15, no. 1 (2009): 115-132.

expelling US diplomats and military attachés from Venezuelan soil.

II. Means and instruments of Venezuela's foreign policy towards the Middle East

After discussing the fundamental elements underlying Venezuelan foreign policy towards the Middle East after 1999, the instruments that the Venezuelan government has used at both the intergovernmental and subnational levels in the Middle East region will now be reviewed. These instruments have been primarily diplomacy and oil. In this section, the analysis will be limited to the most important allies of Venezuela in the Middle East such as Iran, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria.

Among the first international outposts of the government of Hugo Chávez to confront the international position of the United States was the presidential visit to Iraq in August 2000. This rapprochement with the government of Saddam Hussein did not prosper due to the attacks of September 2001, the war on terrorism waged by then-US President George W. Bush, and the subsequent invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

Iran

In the 1970s, Venezuela and Iran established ambassadors and a bilateral relationship that had ups and downs. It was not until the end of the presidency of Muhammad Khatami that Iran sought rapprochement with Venezuela¹⁶, as with other Latin

16 Preferably through the OPEC and the G-15. See Isaac Caro e Isabel Rodríguez, "La presencia de Irán en América Latina a través de su influencia en los países del Alba", *Atenea (Concepción)* 500 (2009): 21-39.

American countries¹⁷. With the triumph of Hugo Chávez in the 2004 referendum and the arrival of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, these diplomatic approaches reinforced the alliance between Iran and Venezuela¹⁸, growing in two areas.

On the one hand, in the bilateral sphere, instruments such as diplomacy and oil were used to finalize cooperation agreements, among which the creation of the joint Iranian-Venezuelan bank in 2010 with an initial capital of \$200 million stands out, as well as the creation of a binational oil company VENIROC, the creation of the binational company VENIRAUTO –which would manufacture Centauro and Turpial car models on Venezuelan soil–, the creation of a Veniran Tractor tractor factory, gold mine concessions, trade route between Caracas and Tehran, among others¹⁹.

On the other hand, in the multilateral sphere, Iran and Venezuela established a common front and alliance as of 2005. An example of this is when during a session at the International Atomic Energy Agency in 2006 Venezuela was one of the countries that opposed the resolution against Iran's nuclear program. Similarly, Venezuela rejected the imposition of sanctions against Iran due to its nuclear program.

The government of Nicolás Maduro (2013-) has held several meetings and has reinforced several cooperation agreements with Iran. However, the most outstanding aspect of this relationship is not the continuation and follow-up of the agreements signed

17 Ver Paulo Botta, "Irán en América Latina: Desde Venezuela hacia Brasil", *Ágora internacional* 4, no. 9 (2009).

18 Formal relations between Iran and Venezuela were established in 1947. See Elodie Brun, "Irán-Venezuela: hacia un acercamiento completo", *Politeia* 31, no. 40 (2008): 19-40.

19 See Adriana Boersner, "13 años de Diplomacia a espaldas de los venezolanos", *Venepolicy*, enero-marzo (2012).

during Chávez's rule, but the aid that Iran has extended to Venezuela while both countries have been financially sanctioned by the United States²⁰: in 2020, Iran sent Venezuela gasoline –defying US sanctions–, spare parts and experts to repair a refinery, as well as ships with food.

Lebanon

The relationship between Venezuela and Lebanon is primarily based on close cooperation with groups like Hezbollah, which is also supported by Iran. This group, which is considered terrorist by several countries in Latin America, Europe and North America, has strengthened its connections with the Maduro government, turning Venezuela, for some, into a space for transnational organized crime²¹.

Speculation regarding connections between members of the Nicolás Maduro government and groups like Hezbollah have increased over the years. The instruments used in this relationship range from diplomacy to illegal economy. In return, the Lebanese terrorist group has supported Maduro not only in the face of the sanctions imposed by the United States on Venezuela but also during 2019 when Juan Guaidó, the then-president of the National Assembly, was sworn in as interim president of Venezuela.

20 See Francisco Rodríguez and Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, “Las sanciones están llevando a Irán y Venezuela a los brazos del otro”, *Foreign Policy* (2020).

21 See Joseph M. Humire, “The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-backed Networks Prop up the Venezuelan Regime”, *Atlantic Council* (2020).

Palestine

Nicolás Maduro has been a critic of Israel and, like Hugo Chávez, has supported Palestine and its recognition as an independent state. The defense and support of the Palestinian cause have been the main engine of the relationship between the two countries. In 2016, the headquarters of the Palestinian Embassy in Caracas was inaugurated and since then bilateral agreements and alliances have been reached in cultural, educational and climate matters, as well as in the areas of energy, trade and health. In 2014, for example, 119 Palestinian students came to Venezuela to study medicine in Caracas²². These alliances have been sealed by various visits to Caracas by senior Palestinian officials, including the 2018 visit of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Likewise, the connection between the Venezuelan government and Palestine includes relations with the Palestinian group Hamas. These relationships have earned Maduro tacit support in the face of economic sanctions and the presidential dispute in Venezuela since 2019.

Syria

Like the relationship with Iran, the Syrian-Venezuelan relationship was strengthened after 2005. As of 2006, various cooperation agreements were signed, among which the creation of a parliamentary friendship group stands out; as well as agreements in sectors such as customs and construction; the creation of trade routes and joint ventures; a direct weekly flight between Caracas and Damascus; the construction of a refinery in Syrian territory, and joint financing funds. During Chávez's government, Syrian

²² See Jorge Rueda, "Venezuela reciben a 119 estudiantes palestinos", *Associated Press* (November, 2014). <https://apnews.com/article/3e99bea939fc4c798f3c1a994d4a7a72>

President Bashar al-Assad visited Caracas, marking the first time that a Syrian president visited Venezuela. Chávez traveled to Syria at least three times. The relationship between members of the government of Nicolás Maduro and Syria extends particularly to the likes of Tareck Zaidan el Aissami, Tareck William Saab Halabi, and Haiman El Troudi. Tareck el Aissami has been accused of illegally providing Venezuelan passports to terrorist members and of being connected to members of the Hezbollah group.

After 2010, when the so-called Arab Spring broke out, the government of Hugo Chávez supported the protests in Egypt and Tunisia, which demanded greater freedom and rights from the governments of these countries. However, the Chávez government further promoted relations with governments such as the Iranian or Syrian, ignoring the struggle and the claims of civil society groups in these two countries²³.

III. Conclusions

There is no doubt that Hugo Chávez reactivated the interaction with countries of the Middle East and other countries of the so-called South-South axis. This reactivation was possible thanks to the reforms undertaken nationally by the so-called “Fifth Republic” or “Bolivarian Republic” but also to the global changes that took place at the beginning of the 21st century. Among the internal changes are a progressive departure from foreign policies prior to 1998, a clear personalization of foreign policy, and a state that responded to the programmatic and personalist apparatus of Hugo Chávez. As for international changes, among

²³ See Elsa Cardozo, “Crisis y cambios en el Norte de África y el Medio Oriente. Implicaciones para Venezuela y su política exterior en el contexto latinoamericano”, *Instituto Latinoamericano de Investigaciones Sociales (Ildis)* (2012).

other things, a less unipolar world with more economic centers of power, financial crises and concern about global terrorism.

Chávez's international activism and his relationship with Middle Eastern countries were so significant that post-2013 relations between Venezuela and the Middle East have lasted because of his activism. Today, countries such as Iran and Syria are among the most important allies for the government of Nicolás Maduro due to an international context different from that experienced by Chávez and unfavorable for the current government of Venezuela. Although Venezuelan foreign policy has not been as proactive under the government of Nicolás Maduro, the Venezuelan government has won the support of Iran and Syria due to the economic sanctions applied by the United States and an international community that has increasingly rejected the authoritarian nature of Nicolás Maduro's regime. The elements of the foreign policy initiated by Hugo Chávez such as the Palestinian cause, oil, and anti-imperialism remain with the Maduro government. Of the means and instruments, intergovernmental diplomacy has been maintained but has not changed substantially. Cooperation with terrorist groups has been strengthened, particularly after 2013.

An alliance that has been the product of Maduro's foreign policy has been established with Turkey²⁴. Starting in 2016, Turkish-Venezuelan relations strengthened after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan suffered a coup. Since then, Turkish-Venezuelan bilateral cooperation has been based on geopolitical interests and

24 See Irmak Ekin Karel, "Política exterior de Turquía en Venezuela: ¿Cuáles son los factores que pueden explicar el recién acercamiento acelerado de Turquía con Venezuela en los últimos años?", *Relaciones Internacionales* 92, no. 1 (2019): 1-29; Omner, Imdat. "Turkey and Venezuela: An Alliance of Convenience." *Wilson Center* (March 2020).

common economic ties, including the sale of Venezuelan gold as an instrument of Venezuelan foreign policy. These gold sales, such as the 24 tonnes of raw gold that were transported to Turkey, are under investigation by agencies in Europe to determine if it is blood gold.

Conclusions

The 11th issue of *Democratización* was dedicated to analyzing Venezuela and autocracies at the international level. This edition had three articles by three women who analyze the same phenomenon from different points of view: Adriana Boesner Herrera, Elsa Cardozo and Rosa María Pérez. The conclusions that bring together their main ideas will be shared below:

- 1. Inherited alliances:** In the article *Relations between Venezuela and the Middle East since 1999*, Adriana Boesner Herrera concludes that most of the alliances that Hugo Chávez made through personalism and the programmatic apparatus that characterized his government endure and serve for Maduro to continue in power. In addition, most of these alliances have something in common: an anti-imperialist ideology and the economic interests of Venezuela's mineral resources. For Maduro, relations with the Middle East are an escape route to circumvent economic sanctions and maintain his hold to power.
- 2. Autocracies take care of each other:** In an increasingly unipolar world, Elsa Cardozo reflects that powers such as China and Russia, with ever larger spaces of power within multilateral international organizations, promote their own versions of human rights and sovereignty, which does not imply the improvement of the freedoms of the peoples, but does protect the actions of other autocracies within each of its borders. In conclusion, it is the duty of the democrats and democracies of the 21st century to counterbalance these ambiguous versions of freedom and

alliances of autocracies that have been taking more and more spaces in the world.

3. **Venezuela as a player:** Venezuela is a matter of importance internationally. The US, China, Russia and Latin America are in conflict over the role it plays in the game of the greater scheme of the world. For Latin American nations, Venezuela is a migratory and organized crime risk. For the other three powers, Venezuela has a privileged geopolitical position. Everyone agrees that, today, Venezuela is the protagonist of an international conflict. Rosa María Pérez concludes that this will continue to be the case. In other terms, the change in the administration of the US government and other governments in Latin America will have an impact on the relations of the continent and on the conflict with other powers. However, it is a developing phenomenon that must be closely followed in order to understand the Venezuelan situation from an international point of view.

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