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Iran's Public Diplomacy in Latin America: When Anti-U.S. Rhetoric is Not Enough to Convince ^[1]

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About a month ago, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited several Latin American countries in a move that numerous analysts and journalists argued was a desperate attempt to find allies, as Iran is becoming increasingly isolated amid pressures from the U.S. and the European Union to limit its nuclear program. The countries and personalities included in his tour were not unfamiliar to him: Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, and Ecuador, all members of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), all sharing the same opinion that U.S. foreign policy is imperialistic. It can be argued that Ahmadinejad won the hearts and minds of the Latin American public simply because there was an echo amongst the group of Latin American presidents against an imperial U.S. Although this “anti-U.S.” rhetoric has been the most visible sign of Iran’s rapprochement in Latin America, there are still signs that show how Ahmadinejad’s attempt to win support in this region will take more than overtly antagonizing the U.S. Ultimately, the challenges of Iran in this region could be to prove that offering its partnership is beneficial in spite of its domestic politics, specifically those related to its religious-centered laws; but also, to portray itself as a peace-seeking nation amid the controversy of its nuclear program’s intentions.

It is evident that relationships with Latin America are a priority in Iran’s foreign policy. However, Iran’s interests are primarily focused on two actors: ALBA countries, which have been the most concerned in preserving relations with Iran because they are the main recipients of Iranian economic and development cooperation programs, and Brazil. Brazil is Iran’s main trading partner in the region, and a big supporter during former President Lula’s administration, of Iran’s diplomatic maneuvers to maintain its nuclear program. Nevertheless, the expansion of Iran’s commercial and diplomatic relations has not seemed to produce enough trust and sympathy for the Iranian leader among the Latin American publics. This can be attributed to three factors of Iranian actions and rhetoric:

1) Ahmadinejad’s controversial declarations regarding homosexuality have caused negative reactions in a region where Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender rights are gaining recognition. Additionally, his anti-Zionist rhetoric has caused unrest amongst pro-Israeli groups, particularly in Argentina where the biggest Jewish community in Latin America is located.

2) Iran’s punitive practices such as stoning and other torture related measures revealed by the wide media coverage across several Latin American countries of Sakineh Ashtiani’s case are met with disapproval. This example and the measures to “prevent the diffusion of the Western culture” dictated by the Islamic leaders portray Iran as obscure, medieval, and authoritarian to

the Latin American publics.

3) Accusations from Israel and the U.S. regarding Iran's nuclear program intentions and its presence in Latin America have raised questions and concerns surrounding trading, cooperating, and establishing diplomatic relations.

Consequently, Iran's efforts to convince the publics of its genuine intentions to cooperate have increased and Ahmadinejad is on course to demonstrate how the people of Iran share commonalities with the people of Latin America. Seeking the support of "the revolutionaries" has been one step. The most visible support comes from Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez and more recently from Cuba. Two days after meeting with Fidel Castro, the Cuban leader published an article that was widely covered in the media titled, "world peace hangs in the balance," praising Ahmadinejad's courage and indifference to U.S. warnings and sanctions to limit Iran's uranium enrichment and claiming that the U.S. will be solely responsible if there is war with Iran.

Another step for Iran has been to provide assistance to Latin American people. In 2009, Iran opened a hospital in a poor locality of Bolivia. In what can be considered medical diplomacy, Iran began reaching directly to the Latin American population, moving from traditional high-level meetings with diplomats and government officials, to more public strategies. However, the good-will intentions remained unclear. On the first day of the hospital's opening, Bolivians were surprised by the fact that the feminine staff was wearing veils as part of a requirement by the Iranian sponsored health facility. The assistance project, rather than inspiring solidarity, nurtured suspicion, and the whole issue was framed under a freedom of religion controversy in the media which led government officials to declare that the press was waging a war against Iran's aid.

The most recent attempt to influence Latin American public opinion is "HispanTv." The Spanish language television station was officially launched after Ahmadinejad's latest visit, but has been broadcasting since 2010. With this new element, Iran seeks to counter the media coverage, mostly centered in the regime's opposition repression, its punishment measures, and the ways to lessen American cultural influence. It may also strengthen cultural ties, transmit Iran's message of peace and justice, and promote Iran's health and scientific developments, fields which have been the cornerstone of Iran's cooperation with ALBA countries.

Although "HispanTv" may expand Iran's public diplomacy beyond the ALBA countries, it is probable that its credibility will continue to be contested. Iranian ambitions will not be able to gain significant sympathies from the entire region, unless it begins to actively conduct public diplomacy towards Brazil. It will be interesting to see if Iran has a strategy to influence Brazilians, especially now that the current Brazilian president, Dilma Rousseff, has chosen to adopt a more critical position towards the Iranian regime.

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