



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States

## *Context Paper:* **Deepening the dialogue with the Jewish Community in Venezuela**

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In December 2008, President Chávez, along with the Presidents of Brazil and Argentina, signed a joint declaration against anti-Semitism, racism and all forms of discrimination. This followed an August 13<sup>th</sup> meeting between President Chávez and a Jewish delegation, led by Mr. Ronald Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress (WJC), to deepen the dialogue between the Jewish community and the government of Venezuela, and to discuss efforts to end anti-Semitism and discrimination of any kind in Latin America.

However, allegations of anti-Semitism against Venezuela have been politicized in Washington as an attempt to isolate and sanction Venezuela.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Venezuela's relation with Iran is often used by foes of Venezuela to justify these irresponsible and baseless accusations. However, Venezuela's relations with Iran and Israel are based on the principles of multipolarity and mutual respect.

**Venezuela has never pursued anti-Semitic policies, and is a progressive state which constitutionally guarantees religious freedom.** The country and its government respect Judaism and the Jewish people, just as it respects the constitutional rights of all Venezuelans regardless of gender, race, or creed. Venezuelans of diverse religions hold important posts throughout the government. In fact, Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro has Jewish heritage, as President Chávez noted in the meeting.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Lobe, "US Neo-Cons Accuse Chavez of Anti-Semitism," *Inter Press Service*, January 13 2006, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=31767>

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

Therefore, it is important to clarify the following:

- The meeting between President Chávez and leaders of the world and Venezuela Jewish community resulted in plans to work together in the region to end any kind of discrimination.
- In the joint declaration, President Chávez expressed worry at the continued existence and global expansion of racism and anti-Semitism, and reaffirmed Venezuela's commitment to non-discrimination and equality.
- The Jewish community in Venezuela has deep roots and has made important historical contributions to the country.
- Venezuela has recognized Israel since its creation, respects its sovereignty and does not question its existence. Policy disagreements are based on different conceptions of the best path towards achieving lasting peace in the Middle East.
- Relations between Venezuela and Iran have a long history based mainly on shared membership in important multilateral organizations such as OPEC.
- The ideals, constitutional principles, and realities of the Bolivarian revolution, including peace, equality, social justice and human rights, are completely at odds with allegations of any sort of discrimination, including anti-Semitism.



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## The Meeting in Caracas between President Chávez and Jewish Community Leaders

Also present in the meeting of August 13<sup>th</sup> were Jack Terpins, President of the Latin American Jewish Congress; Abraham Levy Benshimol, local representative of the Jewish community and President of the Venezuelan Confederation of Israeli Associations (CAIV); and other leaders of the Jewish community throughout the world. Alongside the President, the government was represented by several high-level officers, including Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro and Bernardo Álvarez, Ambassador to the United States. Héctor Timerman, Argentina's Ambassador to the United States, who was also at the meeting, and Argentina's President, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, were instrumental in bringing the meeting to fruition.

**This was not the first time representatives from CAIV had met with the government of Chávez. In a 2006 meeting with government officials, CAIV had "rejected the allegations of anti-Semitism maliciously attributed to the Venezuelan government."**<sup>3</sup>

By all accounts the meeting on August 13<sup>th</sup> was a success. After the meeting, some of the participants stated the following:

- **Ronald Lauder.** President of the World Jewish Congress (WJC): "President Chávez promised to meet the [presidents of Brazil and Argentina] to jointly condemn all forms of anti-Semitism, discrimination against

minorities and anti-Muslim sentiment."<sup>4</sup>

- **Jack Terpins,** President of the Latin American Jewish Congress (LAJC): "The Jewish community is more at ease with President Hugo Chávez, who demonstrated that he is a great friend of the Jewish community and who wants to fight anti-Semitism in Latin America."<sup>5</sup>
- **Héctor Timerman,** Argentina's Ambassador to the United States: "This is a gesture that speaks about the leadership and opinions of President Chávez regarding the need to end all types of discrimination in our region."<sup>6</sup>
- **Nicolás Maduro,** Minister of Foreign Affairs: "We spoke about discrimination and the historic struggles we have had, [including] discrimination against indigenous people, against African Americans, as well as anti-Semitism, which we condemn absolutely."<sup>7</sup>
- **Bernardo Álvarez,** Venezuela's Ambassador to the United States: "It is a historic meeting, because it buries the international campaign which claims that President Chávez or Venezuela promoted discrimination or anti-Semitism."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> National Assembly Statement, "Parlamento Rechaza Comunicado De Los Medios Contra El Presidente De La Republica," January 26, 2006. <http://www.mv.gov.ve/noticias/index.php?act=ST&f=18&t=29047>

<sup>4</sup> "WJC meets Chávez," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, August 14 2008, <http://www.jta.org/cgi-bin/iowa/breaking/109922.html>

<sup>5</sup> Transcription of statements issued at the end of the meeting, August 13 2008, <http://venezuela-us.org/live/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Transcription-meeting-Jews-Ag-13-2008.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez: Relations between Venezuela and the United States are Complex but Are Grounded in Reason," August 18 2008,



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Furthermore, in a letter to President Chávez, Ronald Lauder noted that his “decision to make a public declaration together with presidents Lula and Kirchner will be a significant step that will resonate throughout the world and will clarify your own position regarding anti-Semitism and other manifestations of racism.” Foreign Minister Maduro expressed a desire for this type of meeting to happen again, to create a permanent avenue for dialogue and conversation.

### Joint Declaration Against Racism

On December 16<sup>th</sup>, President Chávez signed a joint declaration condemning all forms racism with Presidents Fernández de Kirchner and Lula da Silva of Argentina and Brazil. The Presidents observed “with serious worry that at the beginning of the third millennium a countless number of humans continue to be victims of racism, discrimination or religious intolerance, in particular, anti-Semitism and anti-Islamism, racial discrimination and other related types of intolerance, and that racist and discriminatory ideologies and practices have resurfaced or persist in various regions of the world.”<sup>9</sup>

Through this declaration, President Chávez once again affirmed Venezuela’s commitment to equality and human rights. The statement was lauded by Ronald Lauder as an “important and very welcome step,” who also noted that through this “clear condemnation of anti-Semitism, president Chávez had fulfilled the pledge given to WJC and LAJC leaders made at [the August 2008 Caracas] meeting.”<sup>10</sup>

<http://venezuela-us.org/?s=Ambassador+Bernardo+Alvarez%3A+Relation+s+between+Venezuela+and+the+United+States+are+Complex+but+Are+Grounded+in+Reason+>

<sup>9</sup> Declaración conjunta contra todo tipo de discriminación y racismo, December 16 2008,

<http://www.congresojudio.org.ar/nota.php?np=438>

<sup>10</sup> WJC welcomes clear commitment by Latin American leaders, *World Jewish Congress*, December 19 2008,

<http://www.worldjewishcongress.org/>

### The Jewish Community in Venezuela

Jewish people played an important role during Venezuela’s War of Independence: several Jewish men enlisted in Simón Bolívar’s army, and at one point he took refuge in the house of Mordechai Ricardo, a Curaçao Jew. The first permanent Jewish community settled in Coro, a coastal city in western Venezuela, in 1821.<sup>11</sup>

In 1939, two ships full of Jewish refugees set sail from Europe hoping to escape the Holocaust. After being denied entry in various countries, the refugees were allowed to settle in Venezuela. Isack Kohn, a Venezuelan Jew who petitioned President López Contreras to allow the refugees to disembark, noted: “When every country closed its doors on us, Venezuela welcomed us with open arms.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Jewish people from Central and Eastern Europe, from North Africa and from other Latin American countries have immigrated to Venezuela over the last century.

Venezuelan Jews have made important political, cultural, and scientific and contributions to the country, as have other immigrant communities which have been welcomed with open arms in the country.

**Venezuela – Israel Relations**  
**In 1947, Venezuela voted in favor of the creation of a Jewish state.** Since the subsequent declaration of Israeli independence in 1948, Venezuela has had ties with Israel based on friendship and mutual respect.

<sup>11</sup> “Breve semblanza de la Comunidad Judía de Venezuela,” CAIV website, March 1 2008, [http://www.caiv.org/noticias.php?noti\\_id=469&apartado=venezuela&seccion=Noticias%20de%20Venezuela#](http://www.caiv.org/noticias.php?noti_id=469&apartado=venezuela&seccion=Noticias%20de%20Venezuela#)

<sup>12</sup> UJA Federation Holocaust Centre of Toronto [http://www.holocaustcentre.com/images/2006\\_HEW\\_PROGRAM.PDF](http://www.holocaustcentre.com/images/2006_HEW_PROGRAM.PDF)



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**Venezuela has long recognized the State of Israel and continues to do so.**

Unfortunately, sectors of the mainstream media have distorted the relationship between Venezuela and Israel, even insinuating that Venezuela is a threat to Israel. The government of Venezuela has no links to any organization which engages in terrorism or threatens the state of Israel. Stories that claim otherwise have no basis in reality and are completely false. U.S. Congressman José Serrano noted that the suggestion “that Iran is going to fund terrorist organizations in Latin America. . . . [is based on] bad information, if not outright lies.”<sup>13</sup>

**It should also be noted that Venezuela and Israel have had a steady commercial relationship over the past decade.**

Unfortunately, cooperation between Israel and Venezuela was hampered in 2005 when the U.S. did not allow Israel to follow through with an agreement to refurbish Venezuela’s F-16 fleet because these planes carry U.S. technology.<sup>14</sup>

**The fact that Venezuela respects the sovereignty of Israel does not mean that it agrees with all of Israel’s policies.**

These disagreements should not be viewed as disparaging the Jewish people or the Jewish faith. The government of Venezuela does not engage in or tolerate anti-Semitism; in fact, the government has a proven track record of fighting against discrimination and helping

historically oppressed communities. Venezuelan critiques of both Israeli and Iranian policies and statements have always been made in the name of peace for the Middle East, and for the security and development of all peoples, including Israelis.

**Venezuela – Iran Relations**

Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution is secular and progressive. **The relationship between Venezuela and Iran goes back to the mid-twentieth century and is partly based on oil**, south-south cooperation and a rejection of any hegemony.

In 1949, Venezuela proposed the establishment of OPEC and sought out key oil producers, including Iran, for input and cooperation. The organization was eventually established in 1960; Venezuela and Iran were two of the organization’s founding members and have cooperated over the years.

Since coming to power, President Chavez has made a concerted effort to strengthen the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). As a result, Venezuela has sought close alliance with all OPEC members, including Iran.

Besides oil, both countries have been linked by a shared desire for South-South cooperation. Venezuela and Iran are members of the Non-Aligned Movement, founded in 1961, the G-77, founded in 1964, and the Group of 15, founded in 1989. Today, economic cooperation between the two countries goes beyond oil and includes joint venture projects in milk production, and automobile, bicycle and tractor manufacturing.

Venezuela respects Iran’s sovereignty and has historically been committed to peace. However, **Caracas has, at times, been critical of statements emanating from Tehran.** For example, in 2005, when a member of the Iranian government called for the destruction of Israel, Vice President José

<sup>13</sup> Terrorist Activities in Latin America, House of Representatives, November 5 2007, <http://serrano.house.gov/media/pdfs/Serrano%20Latin%20America%20Speech%20110507.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Nathan Guttman “US asks IAI to halt upgrading Venezuelan F-16s,” *Jerusalem Post*, October 21 2005, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/jpost/access/919351081.html?dids=919351081:919351081&FMT=ABS&FMTS=ABS:FT&type=current&date=Oct+21%2C+2005&author=&pub=Jerusalem+Post&edition=&startpage=02&desc=Report%3A+US+asks+IAI+to+halt+upgrading+Venezuelan+F-16s>



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Vicente Rangel immediately denounced these statements and stated the following: "I am against any action designed to erase any country from the map, whether it is Israel, whether it is Iran or whether it is Iraq."<sup>15</sup>

### **The Bolivarian Revolution and allegations of anti-Semitism**

The key principles of the Bolivarian revolution include a commitment to social justice, to peace, to equality and to human rights. All of these are completely at odds with any kind of discrimination, including anti-Semitism. President Chávez has attempted to disabuse the public about the false claims regarding anti-Semitism: "[Anti-neoliberal] I am, anti-imperialist even more so, but anti-Semitic, never, that's a lie."<sup>16</sup>

However, **there have been occasions when the government has had to carry out investigations for serious violations of the law that have involved Jewish individuals.** Following the 2002 coup d'état, police investigated and searched dozens of places, including a Jewish community center, where coup plotters were suspected of storing arms. In 2004, a Jewish school was searched as part of an investigation into a car bombing, following a tip that arms were being transferred there. Though the search did not produce evidence, it unfortunately and understandably caused distress in the Jewish community. Vice President José Vicente Rangel noted that this was a "decision by one of the judges on the case, and that the executive would never initiate any such aggression against the Jewish community."<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, in a 2006 speech, President Chávez made a reference linking the people who harangued and drove Simon Bolívar away to those who crucified Jesus. **Venezuelans, including Venezuelan Jews, understood this to be nothing more than a reference to oligarchs, a common theme in the President's speeches.** Observers in the United States and elsewhere believed these statements to be anti-Semitic, partially due to the fact that the quote was taken entirely out of context. However, to some extent this reaction is understandable; racism in the United States is often hidden by use of code, and President Chávez inadvertently used this code. His statements should not have been perceived as anti-Semitic. Fortunately, some members of the American Jewish community recognized this and spoke about it. Rabbi Arthur Waskow said the following: "I know of no one who accuses the Jews of fighting against Bolívar, and certainly I, and most Jews, teach that it was the Roman Empire and Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus."<sup>18</sup>

### **Events in December and January**

Unfortunately, two events, Venezuela's decision to withdraw its Ambassador to Israel in December 2008 and an attack on a Caracas synagogue in January 2009, have once again led to media manipulation and false allegations about anti-Semitism in Venezuela.

Although President Chávez expelled the Israeli Ambassador to Venezuela in protest over Israeli military action that left thousands of civilians dead in the Gaza Strip, **he made**

<sup>15</sup> "Venezuelan Vice President Against Erasing Israel from the Map," *Associated Press*, October 28, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> "Chavez Summarizes Accomplishments of 2005 and Accuses U.S. of Interference in Venezuela," *VenezuelaAnalysis.com*, January 16 2006, <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/news/1571>

<sup>17</sup> Julie Drucker, "A Chilling Raid," *The Jewish Journal*, December 9 2004,

[http://www.jewishjournal.com/world/article/a\\_chilling\\_raid\\_20041210](http://www.jewishjournal.com/world/article/a_chilling_raid_20041210)

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Toothaker, "Jewish leader has serious doubts Chavez's speech was anti-Semitic," *Associated Press*, [http://venezuela-us.org/2006/02/10/jewish-leader-has-serious-doubts-chavezs-speech-was-anti-semitic/?preview=true&preview\\_id=11516&preview\\_once=f859cf0cd0](http://venezuela-us.org/2006/02/10/jewish-leader-has-serious-doubts-chavezs-speech-was-anti-semitic/?preview=true&preview_id=11516&preview_once=f859cf0cd0)



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**it clear that this action was taken as a response to Israel government's actions, and should not be construed as an affront to the Jewish people.** President Chávez has long hoped and called for an end to violence in the Middle East in the hopes that a necessary and lasting peace can be achieved.

Regarding the break-in and vandalism of the Israel Tiferet Synagogue of Caracas, the Venezuelan government immediately condemned the crime and rapidly launched an investigation.<sup>19</sup> The investigation resulted in the arrests of 11 people whose apparent motive was robbery. Elías Farache, President of the Israelite Association of Venezuela, said the Jewish community “felt the support of every sector of society, especially the government” following the attack and investigation.<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

Accusations of anti-Semitism against the government of President Hugo Chávez suggest that there are those interested in taking advantage of any opportunity to distort facts and create tension between the Venezuelan (and international) Jewish community and the government.

Nevertheless, the government of President Chávez has been emphatic in rejecting any expression of anti-Semitism as well as any other type of discrimination. The President himself reiterated this message in meetings held in August 2008 with representatives of the Jewish community in Venezuela, Latin America and the world, as well as in the joint declaration against all types of discrimination signed with the Presidents of Argentina and Brazil.

<sup>19</sup> For more information please read our Fact Sheet titled: “About the Attack on a Caracas Synagogue” at <http://venezuela-us.org/live/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/FS-about-synagogue-attack-Final.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Telephone interview with President Hugo Chávez on “Dando y Dando” a program broadcast by Venezolana de Televisión. February 5, 2009

This commitment to non-discrimination was further demonstrated with the quick response and condemnation of the attack against the Caracas synagogue that came as soon as news of the incident was reported. Furthermore, as a sign of the government's support for the Jewish community, following the break-in, Foreign Minister Maduro, Interior Minister Tareck El Aissami and the Director of the CICPC (Venezuela's top investigative police agency) visited the synagogue for a discussion with Jewish community leaders and to inform the public about the ongoing investigation.<sup>21</sup>

In a statement made during this visit to the synagogue, Foreign Minister Maduro reaffirmed Venezuela's vision of equality, coexistence and communication:

“We affirm the full religious freedom and equality that prevails in Venezuela. . . We are one people, but we also have a Constitution that absolutely expresses the conduct, identity and profound vision we have of the world, the wide view of the world regarding beliefs, and the deep practice of beliefs through the different religious communities who live in this country. So we wanted to come at this time, on behalf of the government of President Hugo Chávez, to thank the Jewish community and affirm to the Jewish community our willingness to have dialogue, closeness and all of our respect. We are at your service.”<sup>22</sup>

April 28, 2009

<sup>21</sup> “Jewish community affirms its satisfaction with investigation over Caracas synagogue vandalism case,” Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, February 12, 2009. <http://venezuela-us.org/2009/02/12/jewish-community-affirms-its-satisfaction-with-investigation-over-caracas-synagogue-vandalism-case/#more-5923>

<sup>22</sup> Nicolás Maduro, Statement Made During a Press Conference, Israel Tiferet Synagogue of Maripérez, Caracas. February 12, 2009.



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