

ARGENTINA, ISRAEL AND IRAN: LEAVING NEUTRALITY BEHIND

The geopolitical shift of Argentine President Milei's government and its alignment with Israel could constitute a provocation to the enemies of the Hebrew state and their extensions in Latin America. Does Milei's geopolitical stance represent a risk for Argentina?

At the beginning of May 2024, the UN General Assembly voted on the possibility of granting Palestine full member status. Although the vote was non-binding (only symbolic), the United States has vetoed this possibility. This vote takes place in the context of a terrible war in Gaza following the October 2023 attacks, with Israel under fire for its military actions in Rafah, a near war between Israel and Iran, and most countries around the world denouncing the war crimes of both sides.

Now, the granting of this status contributes to the goal of giving the Palestinian State greater visibility and political-international influence, and is also accompanied by recognition as a state by several European countries. However, among the countries that voted against this symbolic status, Argentina is surprisingly included. Argentina has traditionally maintained a neutral position in the Arab-Israeli conflict, having recognized the Ramallah government and keeping its embassy in Tel Aviv.

Given this background, this Copernican turn by the new Milei government is striking, but makes sense when we delve into its geopolitical framework. Since the beginning of its term, the new Argentine administration has made its unwavering commitment to the United States and especially to Israel clear. During his recent visit to Israel, the Argentine president even mentioned the possibility of moving the Argentine embassy to Jerusalem — a clear declaration of alliance with the Hebrew state. It is well known that a country's relationship with Palestine can often extend to its relations with the broader Arab world and also with Persia. This realignment affects, to varying degrees, the perception of Argentina by Arab countries, with potential consequences in politics, trade, and possibly even security.

If we review the precedents, there was a time when Argentina, in practice, collaborated with a military coalition against an Arab country — namely, Operation Alfil. Following that war, Argentina suffered two terrorist attacks (1992 and 1994), the worst in its history, which to this day have been attributed to Hezbollah and Iran (although the motives behind the attacks remain under debate). Furthermore, to the previously mentioned general context, we must add that there is now close military cooperation between Bolivia and Iran, and the presence of Hezbollah cells in Chile and the Tri-Border Area (Brazil/Paraguay/Argentina) has already been denounced by Argentina.

In light of these events, several questions arise: What are the consequences for Argentina of this new pro-Israel alliance scheme within the Israeli-Arab-Persian context? Is there evidence supporting the possibility of an attack on Argentine soil?

Argentina's New Israeli-Arab-Persian Agenda

In his statements both before and after taking office, the new Argentine president has made his international agenda very clear: on one hand, pro-Israel (especially reinforced after the October 2023 attacks), pro-United States (particularly with the Republican side, and even more so with Trump), and on the other, the reduction or outright rejection of official ties with communist countries and dictatorships (sic)¹.

Now, two specific points of Milei's foreign policy perspective must be highlighted. First, the separation between his public qualifiers (towards countries and their leaders) and Argentina's political position toward those countries. Second, the separation between the official stance of Argentina and the possibility of private actors engaging in trade relations with those same countries. The latter is reflected in statements made by Diana Mondino, Argentina's current Foreign Minister, who stated that only private companies buy or sell from Chinese companies, and that the state (and its international relations) should not interfere in that trade².

¹ Editorial Note (2023) – *Milei called Lula a "communist" and "corrupt" and stated with which countries he would break off relations.* Article from La Nación. Available at: <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/milei-califico-a-lula-de-comunista-y-corrupto-y-adelanto-con-que-otros-paises-romperia-relaciones-nid08112023/>

² Editorial Note (2024) – *Business leaders speak of the failure of Mondino's trip to China and fear that the Chinese market will close to Argentine beef.* Article from La Política Online. Available at: <https://www.lapoliticaonline.com/politica/la-gira-de-mondino-por-china-genero-preocupacion-entre-los-empresarios-no-sabe-controlar-sus-impulsos/>

In other words, a distinction is made between the country's official foreign policy (which may be critical) and the commercial relations between private Argentine companies and the criticized country.

Having clarified this, the most relevant countries in the region are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Both countries, at least directly, are not involved in the Gaza conflict, and even maintain favorable positions toward Israel — although in recent months, Hebrew-Arab relations have taken a downturn.

For its part, Israel and Iran together represent only a tiny portion of Argentina's foreign trade, so both the positive³ and negative effects of this geopolitical stance are minimal. Strictly speaking, Argentina's new geopolitical positioning in the region does not represent significant commercial changes — at least none directly tied to this shift. For example, fluctuations in oil prices due to the Israeli-Arab-Persian conflict would likely affect Argentina regardless of its geopolitical orientation.

The consequences of this manifest alignment are more closely tied to security, and to a much lesser extent, to politics. When it comes to security, the only country officially implicated in investigations related to terrorist attacks on Argentine soil is Iran⁴.

In this respect, it is worth briefly reviewing the history of Buenos Aires–Tehran relations.

During the 20th century, the two countries maintained only limited and formal relations. These ties were severely strained after the 1990s terrorist attacks, as several Iranian officials were investigated as suspects. Later, in a geopolitical turn, the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner sought to normalize relations by signing a Memorandum of Understanding. This document reopened diplomatic dialogue, which had been severely damaged by the accusations made by the Argentine state. This rapprochement, however, came into question after the rise of the new Argentine

³ It must be noted that Argentina's Ministry of Defense holds several contracts with Israel's military industry (specifically Elbit Systems) for upgrading the TAM tank to the advanced TAM 2C model. While numerically small, this is a strategic sector. As of this report's writing, no official statements have been made about new agreements directly resulting from Argentina's recent geopolitical alignment with Israel. Available at: <https://www.zona-militar.com/en/2024/01/24/tam-2c-a2-ifv-and-helicopters-some-of-the-modernization-and-acquisition-plans-of-the-argentine-army-for-2024/>

⁴ Buschschluter, V. (2024) – *Argentina seeks arrest of Iranian minister over 1994 bombing*. Article from BBC. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-68888587>

president, who made it clear he would resume the "Persian lead" in the investigation of the 1992/1994 attacks^{5 6}.

Currently, although diplomatic relations exist, Milei has harshly condemned the Iranian attack on Israel (which was itself a response to Israel's bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus, April 2024)⁷, while reiterating his support for Israel and abandoning the traditional discourse of neutrality. Additionally, the Argentine government promptly ordered the temporary closure of several embassies in the region (Damascus, Tehran, Tel Aviv, and Beirut)⁸.

The threat from Iran, however, does not stem directly from the state itself — which feels distant to most Argentines — but rather from its alleged proxies (associated groups abroad) in Latin America.

Iran's military agreements with Bolivia⁹ — including the delivery of surveillance drones and other equipment — had already been criticized by the Argentine government, even before the current administration took office¹⁰. The concern was that a country accused by Argentina of sponsoring terrorist attacks could supply weapons and intelligence systems to another Latin American country, and that these tools could fall into the wrong hands and potentially assist in a new attack.

Following Iran's attack on Israel, Argentina reinforced its border controls and increased intelligence collaboration with Israel and the United States¹¹, although no official threat has been made public.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Elliot, L. (2024) – *Argentina court blames Iran for deadly 1994 bombing of Jewish Center*. Article from Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/argentina-court-blames-iran-deadly-1994-bombing-jewish-center-2024-04-12/>

⁷ Berg, R. (2024) – *Why have Israel and Iran attacked each other?* Article from BBC. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68811276>

⁸ Editorial Note (2024) – *The government reaffirmed its stance on Iran's attack and the Israeli ambassador stated that Milei is "on the right side."* Article from El Cronista. Available at: <https://www.cronista.com/economia-politica/javier-milei-volvio-a-la-argentina-y-liderara-un-encuentro-en-casa-rosada-para-analizar-el-conflicto-en-medio-orient/>

⁹ This topic was addressed by the author in a previous article: <https://iari.site/2023/08/20/iran-bolivia-military-cooperation-what-does-it-mean-for-the-security-of-the-region/>

¹⁰ Editorial Note (2024) – *Argentina requests explanations from Bolivia over military agreement with Iran*. Available at: <https://www.escenariomundial.com/2024/05/02/argentina-pide-explicaciones-a-bolivia-por-el-acuerdo-militar-con-iran/>

¹¹ Fajardo, O. (2024) – *Argentina increases security and border control levels after Iran's attack on Israel*. Article from CNN. Available at: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2024/04/15/argentina-refuerza-nivel-seguridad-control-fronteras-iran-israel-orix/>

Additionally, Hezbollah activity in Argentina's northern frontier and the Tri-Border Area (the junction of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil) was denounced in April 2024¹² by the current Minister of Security Patricia Bullrich. She also announced an internal security increase due to potential threats.

Another important point concerns investigations linking Hezbollah with drug traffickers from Bolivia and Paraguay. Besides financing, these traffickers would allegedly provide Hezbollah with weapons. According to journalist Gustavo Sierra, Hezbollah possesses a powerful financial infrastructure based on narcotics, and cocaine manufactured in the Andean region finds its escape route through the Tri-Border Area. From there, it is exported to the Middle East in exchange for weapons and equipment for local criminal groups.

Investigations have revealed that Nasser Abbas Basmad (a Lebanese filmmaker and Khomeinist thinker) is Hezbollah's regional leader in Latin America. His activities reportedly include money laundering, drug trafficking, and arms trafficking¹³.

In Argentina specifically, the name Bakarar stands out. Since 2020, Assad Ahmad Bakarar has been under investigation in Argentina for various charges, including chemical precursor trafficking and drug trafficking. According to intelligence agencies and a report by the late prosecutor Alberto Nisman¹⁴, Bakarar is the chief financial operator of Hezbollah in Latin America, appointed on June 10, 2004. Another member of the same family, Hatem Ahmad Bakarar, was already designated by the United States as a financier of the Lebanese organization, among other individuals. Regional intelligence agencies — especially Argentina's — have focused their efforts on these figures and their networks to dismantle any potential actions that could threaten public safety.

These concerns are supported by intelligence services from both Chile and Argentina regarding a common threat: indigenist movements in the Patagonian region, whose

¹² Editorial Note (2024) – *Patricia Bullrich stated that there are Hezbollah members in the Tri-Border Area*. Available at: <https://www.borderperiodismo.com/politica/patricia-bullrich-aseguro-que-hay-miembros-del-hezbollah-en-la-triple-frontera/>

¹³ Montaruli, F. (2021) – *Tip of the iceberg: Hezbollah's narco-terrorism in Latin America exposed*. Article from IranWire. Available at: <https://iranwire.com/es/features-5/69315/>

¹⁴ Nisman was an Argentine prosecutor who, at the time of his suspicious death in 2015, was investigating a potential case of state cover-up regarding the AMIA and Israeli Embassy bombings. The lead he followed pointed to Assad Ahmad Bakarar as Hezbollah's leader in South America and as involved in the attacks on Jewish institutions.

aggressive activity has increased in recent years. Both governments suspect these movements of maintaining ties with Hezbollah and the FARC¹⁵.

In both Argentina and Chile — which share the Patagonian region — there are indigenous resistance movements claiming the return of what they consider their ancestral lands. According to Colombian Navy Lieutenant Commander José Alejandro Porto-Morales, following the Colombian government's 2016 peace accord with the FARC, many guerrilla fighters sold their expertise to criminal groups in Chile and Bolivia, countries where the FARC already had previous connections¹⁶.

The most prominent movement, the RAM (Ancestral Mapuche Resistance), has claimed responsibility for various attacks (using explosives and arson) in the western regions of Argentine Patagonia and Chilean Araucanía.

Conclusion

In short, Argentina already has a history of terrorist attacks on its own territory. Although responsibility for those attacks has never been fully established due to years of evidence tampering and manipulation, the most thoroughly investigated theory points to the Lebanese organization Hezbollah and Iranian financing and planning.

Additionally, Hezbollah cells are known to operate not only in Argentina but also in neighboring countries. There are Latin American states with military agreements with Iran (such as Bolivia and Venezuela), local groups potentially willing to assist terrorist actions (FARC, RAM), and avenues for financing (mainly through narcotics trafficking).

Perhaps most concerning is Argentina's historically underdeveloped culture of national security prevention. It is well known that any geopolitical stance brings both advantages and risks. In this particular case, the reinforcement of protective measures for the president and his ministers, Jewish institutions in the country, strategic infrastructures (such as nuclear plants and communication stations), and regional and international intelligence cooperation reflect a conscious stance toward the real risks implied by categorical political declarations — in a world where borders are increasingly porous and terrorist organizations are, at the very least, omnipresent.

¹⁵ Porto Morales, J.A. (2021) – *Mapuche terrorism and its connection with the Colombian guerrilla*. Part 1. Article from Pucará. Available at: <https://www.pucara.org/post/el-terrorismo-mapuche-y-su-relaci%C3%B3n-con-la-guerrilla-colombiana-1%C2%BA-parte>

¹⁶ Ibid.