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# Teaching Latin America in Tehran

Through his experiences teaching in Iran, a Latin American Studies professor finds deep historic links and growing interest. But there is still much room for mutual discovery.

I first arrived in Iran in 2011, when the University of Tehran invited me to teach in the Latin American Studies masters' program. I created the courses "Human Rights in Latin America, from the Conquest to the Present," and "Documentary Film in Latin America." After I left, I maintained contact with the Iranian professors and students I had met, who often asked me for assistance and advice on learning about Latin America. Since 2015, my relationship with Iran has grown dramatically.

Teaching about Latin America in Iran was a challenge, both in terms of determining how to introduce topics in a culturally and politically accessible way as well as how to accommodate my students' lack of prior knowledge about the region. Despite this, many students had an excellent command of Spanish. In classroom debates, it was not uncommon to hear the students use literary language they'd picked up from their Spanish and Latin American literature courses. Discussions were peppered with words from medieval Spanish or straight from the pages of Miguel de Cervantes.

In addition, I had to be prepared for a number of surprising analyses. Some students commented in amazement at women dressed in what they considered revealing clothing, in movies, photographs, and advertisements we analyzed. When discussing gender issues in Latin America, a female student said that it was "a disgrace and a humiliation that a woman's



Tehran, Iran NINARA/FLICKR

body was used to sell a washing machine or a soda." On another occasion, while asking students about the possible reasons for enduring violence and poverty in Latin America, a very religious student declared that it was "God's will."

Despite the geographical distance between Iran and Latin America, both regions have very similar physical characteristics: The height of the mountains, the size of the deserts, and the beauty of the salt



flats, on the one hand, and the presence of important natural resources such as oil, natural gas, and copper, on the other. The lush forests in the northern Alborz mountain range bring to mind Chilean Patagonia. The ski resorts near Tehran resemble those near Santiago, Chile, while the Persian Gulf coast appears similar to some beaches in southern Peru. In addition, Iran's urban spaces and communications, as well as the problems and threats they face, have parallels. These issues

include the density and congestion of cities, the pollution, the traffic, and social inequality. The architectural style of buildings constructed after the 1960s—in part a consequence of earthquakes—is almost identical to that found in Mexico, Chile, Peru, or Colombia. The same is true of the oil wells, natural gas fields, and copper mines in Iran, where many Latin Americans—especially Mexicans and Chileans—worked before the Iranian Revolution.

## Historic Ties

The connection between Spain and Persia predates the colonization of Latin America itself. Beginning in the year 711, the Iberian Peninsula and Islamic world facilitated cultural and religious exchanges. Only a few decades later, Portuguese settlements were established on the southern coast of Iran during the Iberian Union (1580-1640) as well as important diplomatic missions between Isfahan and Madrid.

The normalization and intensification of bilateral relations between Iran and Spanish-speaking countries did not happen until after World War II, particularly during Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign between 1941 and 1979. Oil was the main motivation for intensifying the relationship between Iran and Latin America, but there were also geopolitical reasons to do so in the context of the Cold War. Before the overthrow and exile of Shah Pahlavi, several delegations from Spanish-speaking countries visited Iran, while several cultural exchange agreements facilitated Spanish language classes at the University of Tehran and the Translators' School (which later became part of the Allameh Tabataba'i University).

This situation changed completely with the victory of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Several Latin American countries closed their embassies in Iran for security reasons, and those that remained open did not promote cultural exchanges. However, in the 1980s, Cuba and Nicaragua opened embassies in Tehran and were among the only countries in the world to maintain political and cultural ties with the country as part of their geopolitical alliance against the United States.

The end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1989 coincided both with the death of Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The end of Iraqi plane bombings of Iran, new rules of the international arena, and a new domestic political situation incentivized Iran to reformulate its foreign policy toward Latin America. In turn, some countries in the region decided to reestablish diplomatic relations with Iran, either for easier access to the country's oil reserves, or, for oil-producing countries, to define common goals, develop strategies, and share experiences. Oil-producing countries have tried to define common objectives, particularly in terms of negotiating alternatives within international organizations, from the United Nations to OPEC, to join forces against the interests of Western countries, primarily the United States and its allies. Likewise, the

re-opening of the Mexican embassy in Iran in 1992 was fundamental, as Mexico became an important organizer of cultural activities in the Persian country.

However, due to its geographical proximity, Iran has tended to have a closer relationship with Spain than with Latin America. In the academic realm, a significant number of Iranian students travel to Spain to pursue masters' and doctoral degrees. The reasons are numerous: the cost of living and university fees are generally lower in Spain than they are in Iran. Other motivations include the opportunity to learn a foreign language other than English, or to become specialists in Spanish language and literature, particularly given that there are no doctoral degrees in these subjects in Iran. In addition, the disciplinary traditions of Asian and Islamic studies in Spain favor academic exchanges between the main universities in each country.

## Connections in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the midst of globalization and the expansion of the Internet, soccer players, singers, flamenco dancers and guitar players, and movie stars—from Lionel Messi to Antonio Banderas to Shakira—have become new idols for Iranian youth. Thanks to soccer, many Iranian men are able to locate Spanish and Latin American cities on a map, particularly Barcelona and Madrid, and also recognize the Spanish etymology of the players' names. They tend to know Spanish and Argentinian players best, but are sometimes familiar with players from other nationalities who play in the Spanish league.

Despite the growing relationship between Iran and certain Latin American countries over the last 20 years, knowledge about the region is still limited. In my own experiences, given the low number of tourists in most of Iran, locals generally greet travelers they encounter in their everyday lives with awe. This is even more evident when they meet tourists from Spanish-speaking countries, as most of the tourists in the country are from Italy, Germany, and France. When I tell locals I am from Spain, the conversation usually turns to soccer. While I was hitchhiking through the Alamut Valley in Northern Iran, one of the drivers who picked me up in the mountains asked if I was a fan of Real Madrid or of Fútbol Club Barcelona. Though I am not much of a soccer fan, I replied that I supported Barcelona. Immediately, with relief, he replied sardonically: "It's a good thing that you gave me the right answer. If you had replied Real Madrid, you would have had to get out of my car."



Fernando Camacho Padilla with Najmeh Shobeiri, the director of the Spanish Language and Literature department at Allameh Tabataba'i University, and Babak Mousavifard, Director of Hispanic Literature at the Islamic Azad University, along with other students and professors at an academic conference conducted in Spanish in Tehran in December 2016. PHOTO REPRINTED WITH AUTHOR'S PERMISSION

I heard similar questions throughout my journeys in Iran. Recently, I visited the Mausoleum of Ruhollah Khomeini and one of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, responsible for security, said sarcastically but somberly that Iran would defeat Spain by a landslide in the next World Cup. Similar experiences occurred every time that security forces asked me for my passport. Yet in the Iranian news, Spanish-speaking countries are mentioned only when an official diplomatic trip or encounter or some sort of tragedy, such as a terrorist attack or a natural disaster, occurs. Any cultural or historical information about the Spanish-speaking world comes up only in the courses for the undergraduate Spanish language major, but it is primarily related to Spain, its famous cities, greatest monuments, and geography. Spanish and Latin American Literature courses in Iran also include superficial references to the Spanish Civil War, the conquest, the colonization and independence of the Americas, the Mexican and Cuban revolutions, and some of the Latin American dictatorships. As such, students are familiar with some of its most somewhat familiar protagonists, like Simón Bolívar, Evita Perón, and Che Guevara.

However, references to Latin America are primarily related to literature, especially famous 20<sup>th</sup> century authors like Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, Gabriel García Márquez, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, Isabel Allende, and, more recently, Roberto Bolaño—the most widely-read Latin American authors whose works are also available in Persian. Despite the interest in these authors, most of the translations are not done directly from Spanish, but from English or French. There are no Iranian specialists focusing on politics, society, history, or economics of the Spanish-speaking world, so university curricula are designed around the specializations of existing scholars. Consequently, Iranian diplomats who have worked in Iranian embassies in Latin America frequently take part in academic debates back in Iran, especially those concerning political and economic issues. Sometimes they also teach certain university courses, especially in the Masters' in Latin American Studies program at the University of Tehran. The main challenge they face is that, for the most part, they have only worked in one Latin American country, and are tasked with providing a broad overview of the entire region.

Outside the classroom, after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Iranian media began presenting the history of U.S. intervention in Latin America through movies and documentaries, press reports, and even some books. Knowledge about revolutionary processes in Cuba and Nicaragua, and the crimes committed by military dictatorships allied with the United States, especially in Central America and the Southern Cone, began to spread. In 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini decided to break diplomatic relationships with Chile due to the repressive nature of the regime under Augusto Pinochet. Khomeini also broke diplomatic relationships with Israel, South Africa, and Egypt, citing similar reasons. The exile of the Shah in Mexico and Panama in 1979 also placed political attention on those countries for several weeks.

The ideas and images that Iranians have about Latin America today depend on several factors, but generation seems to be the most important. Older people who lived through the Cold War recall lessons from the earlier years of the Islamic Republic, including the history of U.S. intervention in Latin America, its role in the coups in Guatemala and Chile, its support of

various military dictatorships, and its responsibility for human rights violations under these regimes. But younger people, born after the end of the Cold War, tend to be unaware of Latin American politics from that period.

Political leaders who participated in the early years of the Revolution and are still active today maintain clear anti-American sentiments and find commonalities with the rhetoric and speeches of Latin American political leaders from member-states of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), a regional organization created by late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez in 2004. Though severely weakened in the wake of the Pink Tide's ebb, ALBA's strong left-wing ideological commitment as a critic of Washington created an immediate affinity with Iranian officials.

The election of President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) was a decisive factor in lessening political tensions with the West. One of his main foreign policy goals was a "Dialogue among Civilizations." As part of this program Khatami traveled to Cuba and Venezuela, becoming the first sitting Iranian president to step on Latin American land. His successor,



The School of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Tehran, where the Department of Spanish Language and Literature is located. PHOTO BY FERNANDO CAMACHO PADILLA

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), intensified Iranian relations with these two states, visiting Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador several times. Ahmadinejad also signed cooperation agreements with these governments, but his main goal—contrary to Khatami—was to create a bloc against the United States. In the last few years, President Hassan Rouhani (2013-) has decided to maintain ties with several Latin American countries, but with a milder, more conciliatory, and friendlier discourse that may help to improve his image both with the United States and with Latin America. To date, the only Latin American territory that President Rouhani has visited is Cuba, though Rouhani's Minister of External Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, has traveled through Latin America several times.

Over the last two decades, Iranian television has depicted a mainly positive image of the relationship between Iran and the Latin American countries. The global presence of Colombian, Argentine, and Mexican culture—their music, gastronomy, and even their soccer players—has made them better known in Iran than other Latin American countries, though it would be hard for most Iranians to identify which culture pertains to which country. A great deal of information about Latin America comes from movies, music, and other cultural means, although many characters from the region are portrayed as negative stereotypes on television. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that, despite the political difficulties between Tehran and Washington, much of the information in Iran about Latin American countries comes from the United States.

### The Spanish-Speaking World in Iranian Universities

Academic studies in Spanish Language can be pursued in three universities in Tehran: Allameh Tabataba'i University, University of Tehran, and the Islamic Azad University. The first two are public universities that require very high grades for admission. The third one is a private university where grades do not matter. The Islamic Azad University was the first to open a Spanish program in 1985, as part of an effort to train diplomats to help create ties with other countries so that Iran was less isolated internationally. These alliances occurred in countries where anti-Americanism was strong. The next university to open a Spanish program was Allameh Tabataba'i University in 1997, followed by the University of

Tehran in 1999. In the 2018-2019 academic year, the Allameh Tabataba'i University will open a masters' program in Spanish translation, which will focus on linguistics and literature. Outside of Tehran, Spanish is nearly non-existent, and although it is possible to study Spanish in private language schools or as part of technical careers, it is almost exclusively offered at basic and intermediate levels.

About 40 students enter each of these universities to study at the undergraduate level, and more than 85% are women, which is typical of other modern language majors in Iran. Even though the gender composition in Iran is similar to other countries in the West, in Iran, it is the husband's responsibility to be the breadwinner, while the wife keeps the money she earns. Thus, technical or business-related careers are seen as the path toward a good professional future while the humanities offer only small compensation. However, given the large number of Spanish-speakers in the world, learning Spanish can also be professionally helpful. At the same time, humanities are marked as more peaceful and less physical spaces, and due to social circumstances, coded as more appropriate for women than engineering or business, which are strongly coded as masculine.

The social background of Spanish Literature students is diverse. Although most students are Persian, there are also students from other ethnic backgrounds, including Azerbaijanis, Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, and Assyrians. This diversity extends to their religions. Although the majority of students are Shi'a Muslim, there are Sunni Muslim, Christian Orthodox, Catholic, Jewish, and Zoroastrian students. Students hail from both urban and rural parts of the country, as higher education in modern languages is only available in the capital city. A considerable number of undergraduate students are upper and middle class. A small percentage has had the opportunity to travel to Spanish-speaking countries, either through vacations, family migration, or work. In other cases, they are attracted to the language and culture of the Hispanic world or are taking the major as part of a strategy to migrate to a Spanish-speaking country, either permanently or temporarily. In any case, the number of Iranians traveling to the Hispanic world for work has grown over the last decade, given increased contact through commercial, cultural, political, academic, and other ties.

Since the 2009-2010 academic year, the University of Tehran, where I teach, has offered a two-year masters' program in Latin American Studies, promoted

by the government to strengthen relations with the region. The subjects are improvised during the program, either through classes offered by professors from the Faculty of World Studies and other professors, mainly foreign, especially from Mexico, Cuba, or Spain, as well as Iranian diplomats. There are about 15 students per cohort, who usually end up at HispanTV, a television station in Tehran that offers content in Spanish. Some end up employed as Spanish teachers at private institutes, while others hold multiple jobs at a time.

A smaller group manages to leave Iran and begin doctoral studies after receiving their Masters', usually in Spanish cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, Alicante, Salamanca, Malaga, or Santiago de Compostela. They usually return to study linguistics or literature to increase the chances of getting a full-time academic job upon returning to Iran. Occasionally, students and graduates are hired as private or government interpreters and translators, especially in technology companies, businesses, or publishing.

A main goal for students of Spanish and Latin American Studies is to settle in a Spanish-speaking country, especially Spain. However, very few can study in Spain due to the difficult visa requirements established by the Spanish government. Latin America is an option only for the most intrepid students. Even though getting a visa is relatively simple, the geographical distance, cost of airplane tickets, the violence, and especially the lack of professional opportunities in the short and long term make this route unlikely.

In general, students in the Masters' in Latin American Studies program do not have a strong knowledge of the region when they begin, aside from those who have traveled extensively. These students are usually children of diplomats or those who have participated in bilateral exchange programs, often in technology. Other than travelling, most of their exposure comes from literature read in college and during postgraduate studies. These readings are typically distributed as photocopies or pirated books—finding original works is difficult given the sanctions imposed on Iran by the West—but documentaries, media, and television reports also play a role. Censors revise it all—the Iranian government censors material across all media platforms to restrict political content and regulate moral and religious topics.

HispanTV is one of the main sources of information about Latin America for university students, given that this organization has recording studios in several

Latin American countries in addition to its main studio in Tehran. The existence of HispanTV sets Iran apart from other Middle Eastern countries since it is one of the only channels of its kind. Information in the Iranian media also influences ideas about Latin American politics. Internet access and on-site television shows developed by HispanTV show broadly the geographical, cultural, linguistic, demographic, and economic diversity of the region. However, these sources lack deep analysis and reflection of the political, social, and economic reality of Latin America. This affects the students' own critical views. In addition, the simplified anti-imperialist discourse disseminated by the Iranian media hinders and distorts Latin American historical processes. The information students consume through Western and Iranian channels do not represent Latin America in all its depth, and culture receives little attention. For all of these reasons, Iranian students' idea of Latin America is filled with stereotypes disseminated by the commercial culture that comes from the United States and other Western countries.

Given the general lack of knowledge, students' reference points come from comparing their personal experiences and their environment to what they are learning in class. Thus, religion plays a fundamental part in their reflection and analysis. Latin America's religious practices are sometimes compared with Shi'a Islam, but some students perceive social problems in Latin America, such as crime, violence, traffic, and drug consumption, as consequences of Western moral degradation and a lack of values about sexuality, divorce, and out-of-wedlock pregnancies. In their view, these issues *do not happen* in Iran because of the moral integrity of the country's cultural codes. In general, nationalist sentiments in Iran are strong, and when debating Latin America's reality, students refer back to their own values.

For example, when discussing the role of the United States or Latin America's military dictatorships, students quickly reference the Shah Regime or the coup against Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953. When the issue of Indigenous peoples in Latin America comes up, Iranian students discuss the living conditions of different ethnic groups in Iran, especially nomadic groups. Such comparisons also occur when discussing issues such as natural resources, the environment, and human rights.

Given the similarities in the problems and difficulties facing Latin American countries and the Islamic



A group of school girls visit the Fatima Masoumeh Shrine in Qom, which is considered by Shi'a Muslims to be the second most sacred city in Iran after Mashhad, in December 2016. PHOTO BY FERNANDO CAMACHO PADILLA

Republic, it is not always possible to discuss certain political issues without making people feel uncomfortable or even hurt. Therefore, I have had to devise different ways of teaching to evade possible problems with the university authorities. This is less of a challenge in countries with greater degrees of academic freedom and more institutional autonomy from the government, where the teacher is able to implement the curricula most suited to the classroom goals without worrying about the possible academic or political reactions. Finally, students' native language is not Spanish, which makes it necessary to adjust the language level and to use pedagogical strategies to facilitate comprehension.

When a good classroom dynamic is established and students are able to engage with the academic content, it is very rewarding. The students express their gratitude and happiness with great generosity. The excellent results of this collaboration could facilitate more exchanges between Iranian and Spanish universities. In fact, a recent agreement between professors and students

is making steps towards increasing the number of exchange programs between the two countries, which will contribute to a deeper relationship in the future, and thus more mutual knowledge, both about their respective societies as well as their common histories. This experience will certainly serve as an example for the creation of more university cooperation programs between Latin American and Iranian universities. ■

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