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# Five Decades after the Coup: Revisiting Chilean-Iranian Relations under the Pinochet Regime (1973-1980)\*

Renato Vélez Castro<sup>1</sup>

1. PhD in American Studies, Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Santiago de Chile, Santiago, Chile (renato.velez@usach.cl)  0009-0000-2504-9423

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## Abstract

2023 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the US-backed military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile, and installed a military junta led by General Augusto Pinochet. It also marked the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the US-backed coup against Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran. Beyond the parallels of Western intervention directed against sovereign governments, and the imposition of authoritarian US-client regimes, the fact is that Pinochet's rule signaled a period of closer ties between Chile and the Pahlavi regime. From the establishment of a Chilean embassy in Tehran in 1974, cooperation even reached the field of state terror both at home and overseas, as the Chilean secret police reached SAVAK for advice on repression and Pinochet agents offered collaboration in chasing some of the Shah's enemies abroad. The triumph of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 put an end to Chilean-Iranian cooperation and diplomatic relations. The Chilean military industry then supported Saddam's war against Iran by providing weapons to the Iraqi regime - including cluster munitions. Through declassified documents from the Chilean Foreign Ministry, as well as findings by journalistic research, those connections and exchanges, little known by the peoples of both countries, are revisited.

**Keywords:** Chilean-Iranian Relations, Interventionism, Iranian-Latin American Relations, Pinochet Regime, Mohammad Reza Shah Regime, US

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## 1. Introduction

2023 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the US-backed military coup that overthrew the government of Salvador Allende in Chile, and installed a military junta led by General Augusto Pinochet. It also marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the US-backed coup against Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran. From a Chilean point of view and in this particular juncture, it is interesting to dig in the parallels between the two countries' experiences and highlight the ways in which Chilean-Iranian relations developed under the Pinochet regime. The short-lived government of Mossadegh's National Front and its demise bear some similarities to Allende's Popular Unity in Chile. Both were democratically-elected governments, with a program of social reform and asserting national sovereignty by taking control of their countries' main resources, until then owned by Western capital: oil in the case of Iran; copper in the case of Chile. Both governments suffered from covert action aimed at regime change, ultimately carried out by US-trained officers, followed by the imposition of US-backed autocratic regimes.

Nationalization of the Iranian oil resources in 1951 was deemed unacceptable not just for the British, but for the Anglo-American oil cartel as a whole. The UK government reached the American administration and requested its cooperation in overthrowing Mossadegh in a joint CIA-MI6 enterprise codenamed "Operation Ajax/Operation Boot". In 2013, a set of US documents were declassified, acknowledging that the August 1953 coup "was carried out under CIA direction as an act of US foreign policy, conceived and approved at the highest levels of government" (Dehghan & Norton-Taylor, 2013), as a result of which, with full US support, the Shah became the supreme ruler of Iran until 1979. The success of Ajax provided a blueprint for the next CIA's

destabilization operations, as covert action instead of military interventions became the preferred option for achieving regime change abroad. A year later, the first successful CIA coup in Latin America overthrew the reformist government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala and, in the next decades, US-backed military coups would take place across the continent.

In Chile, Salvador Allende's victory in September 1970 represented a threat to the US hemispheric interests. Indeed, Washington spent several years trying to prevent the advance of the Chilean left, already having intervened in the 1963 presidential elections (Kornbluh, 2013). The program of the Popular Unity aimed to raise the standard of living of the masses, deepen land reform and nationalize large sectors of the economy, including the copper industry, dominated by US companies such as Rockefeller's Anaconda and Kennecott Copper. These changes, carried out under the rules of liberal democracy, were conceived as part of a peaceful transition towards a socialist society (the so-called "Chilean way to socialism"), differing from other experiences such as the Cuban revolution.

A secret US memorandum from August 1970 warned that Allende's victory would be "a definite psychological setback to the U.S. and a definite psychological advance for the Marxist ideal" (Kornbluh, 2013, p. 8). Thus, in September 1970, Richard Nixon directed the CIA to prevent Allende's inauguration at all costs, stating the now infamous order to "make the (Chilean) economy scream". Under the codename "Project FUBELT", US intelligence developed strategies to first prevent Allende's inauguration through legal means, and if Allende took office in November 1970, promote a military coup. Almost as a carbon copy of "Operation Ajax", Washington developed all kinds of efforts to destabilize Chile in

form of financial blockades, funding the mainstream press, asking opposition parties and business unions to foment local unrest, and contacting military officers who were plotting a coup. Support for all these activities was revealed in 1975 by the Church Commission report, “Covert Action in Chile”, and by subsequent declassifications obtained by the National Security Archive (Kornbluh, 2013). Thus, CIA’s intervention in the overthrow of the Popular Unity government is an uncontroversial fact, recognized even by those responsible for it.

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1973, the Chilean military carried out one of the most violent coups in the history of Latin America. In the following years, more than 3,000 people were killed or disappeared; dozens of thousands were detained and brutally tortured, while many others went into forced exile. A new era of autocratic rule began, with General Augusto Pinochet as head of a military junta. In this new era, the Chilean regime looked for new allies in its “crusade” against communism. Iran, ruled with iron fist by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, looked like a distant but attractive option, and Chilean-Iranian relations began to flourish.

To carry out the historical reconstruction of this relationship, the documentation of the Chilean Foreign Ministry and the Chilean Embassy in Tehran, preserved in the General Historical Archive of the Chilean Foreign Ministry (AGHMRE) were used as a primary source, accompanied by information from investigative journalism, and complemented by academic literature on the foreign relations of the Pinochet regime in order to contextualize the dynamics of the Chile-Iran relationship.

## **2. An Anti-Communist Crusade: The Foreign Policy of the Pinochet Regime**

In its early years, the Chilean dictatorship established a diplomatic style characterized as “praetorian-ideological” (Muñoz, 1982), marked by: a) the takeover, by the military, of the leadership of Chilean embassies; b) the use of military personnel trusted by Pinochet to carry out key communications with foreign counterparts; and c) “a deliberate style of ideological confrontation with the Soviet bloc and its allies, making anti-communism the central axis of its international position” (Wilhelmy & Duran, 2003, p. 274), which included seeking alliances with like-minded regimes to lead the fight against “international Marxism”. As will be seen later, these three elements were strongly present in Chilean-Iranian relations during the first phase of the Pinochet dictatorship, which coincides with the last years of the Shah's regime.

In South America, the Pinochet regime's anti-communist crusade manifested itself in “Operation Condor”, named for the predatory bird that dominates Chilean skies. Condor, a Chilean initiative, was a system that connected the secret services of South American US-backed dictatorships in order to capture and eliminate their internal enemies across borders. Recently declassified reports date “the beginnings of repressive cooperation towards the end of 1973 and the beginning of 1974, (cooperation) which had the support of the CIA from the very beginning” (Salazar, 2011, p. 204).

Upon Pinochet's request, Colonel Manuel Contreras reportedly met with CIA deputy director Vernon Walters, who in March 1974 sent eight agents to help create and organize the National

Intelligence Directorate (DINA), the regime's secret police. A CIA report published in 2000 stated that Contreras himself was indeed “a significant CIA asset between 1974 and 1977, and that he received unspecified payments for his services” (Salazar, 2011, p. 204). According to a former Mossad agent, Contreras also received support from Israeli intelligence in training DINA personnel, specifically requesting help to create a special force for external operations (Ostrovsky and Hoy, 1990). In this same context, Vianel Valdivieso, a DINA agent close to Contreras, “made contact in Madrid with SAVAK, Iran's secret police, in order to receive advice on dealing with the CIA and US laws” (Cavallo et al., 2008, p. 162).

In February 1974, a meeting of the secret police and military intelligence services of Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay and Chile was held in Buenos Aires, where it was proposed to “establish a coordination system that would allow them to exchange data on the leaders and militants of the continental left” (Salazar, 2011, p. 204). The Condor system, officially established in November 1975 in Santiago de Chile, allowed South American dictatorships to deploy their repressive tentacles in order to persecute their enemies both within the continent as well as overseas, with the support of anti-Castro Cuban networks in Miami and neo-fascist organizations in Europe, carrying out murders and attacks as far as Italy and the US. In fact, the first terrorist attack carried out in Washington DC was perpetrated by the Chilean secret police, when in 1976 it murdered Allende's former foreign minister, Orlando Letelier, using a car bomb (Dinges, 2004; McSherry, 2005).

Beyond Latin America, the countries of the Eastern bloc, an important part of the Non-Aligned Movement and even several

Western European countries cut or downgraded their diplomatic relations with Chile. Thus, Pinochet tried to reach out to countries whose political regimes were similar to the Chilean one, characterized by a triad of “anti-Marxism”, “political authoritarianism” and “economic liberalism”, such as Taiwan under the KMT or South Korea under Park Chung-hee (Ross, 2020). This broader context completes the general picture for understanding the relations between the Pinochet and Shah's regimes.

### **3. Chilean-Iranian Relations during the Pahlavi Regime**

The Republic of Chile established relations with Qajar Iran in 1903. A Treaty of Friendship and Trade was signed shortly after (Library of the Chilean National Congress, 1908). Later on, the Republic of Chile established diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Iran in 1942 (Chilean MFA, 2016). However, it was only with Pinochet's rule that Chile decided to deepen this relationship at the highest level, and took the step of opening an embassy in Tehran. To lead this mission, the regime appointed Arturo Yovane Zuñiga, a Carabineros general who had been the main instigator of the coup conspiracy within the Chilean police. After the coup, he was appointed Minister of Mining and in 1974 he agreed to become the first Chilean ambassador to Iran (González, 2021).

Through a confidential document dated October 21, 1974, the Chilean foreign ministry conveyed to Yovane the main objectives of his mission in Tehran. It described the Shah's regime as “a centralized state with a strong anti-Marxist orientation (which) will undoubtedly have a favorable effect on its disposition towards our country” (AGHMRE, 1974a), highlighting its pro-Western

orientation and close ties to Israel. Among the specific tasks entrusted to Yovane were promoting Iran's cooperation with the Chilean National Oil Company (ENAP), obtaining Iranian support for Chile in international organizations, identifying possible backers of the Chilean resistance within Iran, and using the embassy as “an effective point of observation towards the USSR and the socialist countries, with which Chile does not maintain (diplomatic) relations” (AGHMRE, 1974a).

On November 2nd, Yovane handed over his credentials and personally met with the Shah. During a 40-minute meeting, the ambassador explained to the ruler the official position of the regime on the political, economic and social situation in Chile. During this exchange, the Shah expressed his support for Chile's economic “shock therapy” imposed by neoliberal economists (commonly known as “Chicago Boys”) by stating that “the only way to get a country's economy in order was through the implementation of severe temporary measures, sometimes painful, indistinctly obeyed by the entire nation” (AGHMRE, 1974b). In the same exchange, Yovane informed the Shah on the “anti-Chilean campaign” against Pinochet's regime, and advocated in favor of a united front of countries against “international communism”. “Unfortunately, they (the Marxists) are united and we are not” (AGHMRE, 1974b), the Shah replied. However, a few days after this meeting, in a letter to the Chief of the Asia and Africa Division of the Chilean Foreign Ministry, Yovane described the Shah as “a selfish and calculating man who seeks only his own convenience” (AGHMRE, 1974c), and whose only goal was to become the undisputed leader of the Middle East. Furthermore, he described the repressive measures of the regime's SAVAK as “harsh”, even compared to ones of the Chilean government.



Ambassador Yovane argued in favor of closer economic cooperation with Iran, given that the regime “essentially sustains policies similar to ours, and (has a) notable financial capacity” (AGHMRE, 1975a). In that regard, he held a meeting with the Iranian minister of Industries, Farrokh Najmabadi, proposing Iran to join the Intergovernmental Council of Countries Exporters of Copper (CIPEC), a short-lived OPEC-like body established by Chile and other countries in 1965, as Tehran was preparing to begin mass copper mining by 1980. Most promising were the exchanges in the energy sector. In June 1976, the president of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), Manouchehr Eghbal, made a grand tour to Latin American countries, which included Chile. In Santiago, Eghbal met with executives from the Chile’s National Petroleum Company (ENAP), in talks which paved the way for direct trade between these two state companies (AGHMRE, 1976e). Thus, in December 1976, the CEO of ENAP, Rear Admiral Antonio Costa, visited Tehran and secured the import of 20,000 barrels per day for the coming years. At that time, Yovane noted that “a third of our entire oil imports come from Iran” (AGHMRE, 1976f).

One of the most notable episodes in the Chilean-Iranian relations was the visit to Tehran of Colonel Manuel Contreras, DINA’s chief and Pinochet’s right hand, in April 1976. His plan was to secure military aid for Chile and financial support for Condor operations by offering the Shah to chase and eliminate the man most wanted by SAVAK at the time: Venezuelan militant Ilich Ramirez, also known as “Carlos the Jackal”, responsible for murdering Iran’s oil minister at the OPEC summit of 1975. The details of this visit have been partially reconstructed from the declassified documentation obtained at the Chilean Foreign Ministry and from the investigation by journalist Monica González

(2009). Although Contreras' own account of the events became available through a book published by his son in 2019, it should not be taken at face value. Contreras visited Tehran, accompanied by a delegation made up of Major Vianel Valdivieso, Major Alejandro Burgos de Beer, Colonel Sergio Arredondo, the German Gerhard Mertins, and an unidentified Brazilian officer.

According to the information collected by John Dinges (2004), the plan to assassinate Carlos was born within the Condor network after the arrest and murder in Paraguay of Argentinean militants Jose Fuentes and Mario Roberto Santucho. Along with their elimination, important information was found to help capture Ilich Ramirez, which led to his arrest attempt by the French DST in June 1975. A declassified US Senate reported that "Condor planned an operation aimed to assassinate three well-known European leftists, one of whom was the notorious terrorist 'Carlos'" (González, 2009).

As previously mentioned, the first known contact between the Chilean DINA and SAVAK was made through Valdivieso in Madrid in 1974 (Cavallo et al, 2008). Valdivieso was in charge of the DINA communications division and accompanied Contreras to Tehran in 1976 under the pseudonym "Rolando Galvez Baeza" (González, 2009). Another member of Contreras' delegation was German arms dealer and Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) operative Gerhard Mertins, a former Waffen-SS officer. In Chile, besides providing weapons to the Pinochet regime, Mertins cultivated ties with "Colonia Dignidad", a cult-like closed community established by German immigrants, which was used by the regime as a concentration camp and a clandestine weapons factory. In a secret cable dated February 1976, Ambassador Yovane conveyed to the Chilean regime a message from SAVAK's chief, General Nematollah Nassiri (figure 1):

**Figure 1.** Message from SAVAK's Nematollah Nassiri in Preparation for DINA's Chief Manuel Contreras Visit to Tehran<sup>1</sup>

CLASIFICACION	NUMERO	GRUPO HORARIO	MES	AÑO
SECRETO	4	211430	FEBRERO	1976.-
DEL: EMBACHILE TEHERAN				
AL: SEÑOR MINISTRO				
T E X T O				
<b>PARA EXCLUSIVO CONOCIMIENTO SEÑOR MINISTRO.-</b>				
Mensaje General Nassire Jefe Seguridad Irán a Coronel Manuel Contreras, DINA : " 1.- Agradezco gestión Mertins. 2.- SHA apoyó cooperación con Gobierno Chile. 3.- Melli Bank dispuso colaborar financiamiento conversose crédito 100 a 250 millones dólares a 1, 2 años con posibles 3 años. 4.- Sugiero tomar siguientes medidas insinudas por SVM a) Invitación Oficial a Princesa Ashraf. b) Estudiar visita Ministro Cauas. c) Viaje urgente Coronel Contreras a esta. 5.- Mertins viaja hoy a Bonn fir, reunirse con Luis Valiera, tomará contacto telefónico con Coronel Contreras.				
Y O V A N E				
ESPACIO PARA INSTRUCCIONES E INFORMACIONES				
Nota de Clave: Palabra subrayada se copia tal como venía en el texto. Presente télex llegó el día 22 a las 12:45 hrs. <i>شکاه علوم انسانی ومطالعات</i>				
			V <sup>B</sup> AUTORIDAD DE ORIGEN	V <sup>B</sup> DEPTO. DE CLAVE

FORM. N° 29

Source: AGHMRE, 1976a

1. English translation of the text:

1. I appreciate the efforts of (Gerhard) Mertins.
2. Shah supports cooperation (with) government (of) Chile.
3. Melli Bank arranged to collaborate financially; it discussed credit from 100 to 250 million dollars for a 1, 2 years term, even 3 years is possible.
4. I suggest taking the following measures suggested by SVM:
  - a) Official invitation (to Chile) to Princess Ashraf.
  - b) Consider visit by (Finance) Minister Cauas
  - c) Urgent trip (by) Colonel Contreras to this (embassy).
5. Mertins is traveling to Bonn today (...) he will make telephonic contact with Colonel Contreras

Next month, the Chilean government ordered Yovane to confirm if Mertins “who does credit arrangements, is a trusted man of General Nassiri” (AGHMRE, 1976b). The ambassador indeed proposed Pinochet to extend an invitation to Prince Ashraf and SAVAK’s chief Nassiri in order to visit Chile (AGHMRE, 1976c), which never materialized despite Yovane’s efforts. Using a fake passport, Contreras arrived in West Germany, where he met with Mertins (Gonzalez, 2009), days before their arrival to Tehran. On April 8, a secret cable informs Yovane that an unidentified “diplomatic officer on a special mission will arrive at that (embassy) in three days” (AGHMRE, 1976d). An insider source gave journalist González (2009) a series of photographs taken at the Chilean embassy in Tehran, where Ambassador Yovane appears together with the delegation led by Contreras and Mertins.

González claimed that “Contreras did not obtain from the Shah the funds he required to continue with the international operations of Condor and DINA” (2009), but details on the visit were actually unknown until 2019, when the son of the DINA’s chief published a book based on his father’s memoirs. According to that account, SAVAK’s Nassiri took Contreras on a short trip to the Iranian-Soviet border in the Caspian Sea, where the latter asked to acquire hardware for the Chilean army (Contreras, 2019). The next day, Contreras personally met with the Shah. The autocrat told DINA’s chief that he was aware of the Condor operations overseas, including in Europe, and asked for assistance in eliminating Ilich Ramirez. DINA’s chief then asked to forge an alliance, receive weapons and share contacts in return. The Shah then offered to provide Pinochet with eleven “Huey Cobra” helicopters. According to Contreras “we never received those helicopters because of (the opposition of) Jimmy Carter’s government in the US, but Iranian

intelligence provided us with valuable resources of all kinds” (Contreras, 2019, p. 415). No further information has been found in this regard.

Arturo Yovane left the Chilean embassy shortly after. In one of his final reports he stated that it was difficult to influence Iran’s behavior in international organizations, but that “the attitude of Iran gradually changed, and nowadays it considers Chile’s positions in a more objective manner” (AGHMRE, 1976h). In their last encounter, the Shah explained to the ambassador that Tehran did not take an aggressive approach towards the USSR in international bodies since it had “the enemy at the gates” (AGHMRE, 1976h). Yovane’s final assessment on Chilean-Iranian relations was positive, with hopes of increased cooperation given Tehran’s informed desire to open an embassy in Santiago.

#### **4. Broken Relations: The Islamic Revolution and the Pinochet Regime**

Chile’s first ambassador to Iran was replaced in late 1976 by retired army colonel Felipe Geiger Stahr. Geiger will witness the process leading up to the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the birth of the Islamic Republic. As part of their job, both Yovane and Geiger produced monthly reports on Iran’s internal situation, which offer an important insight into the Chilean perception on the events in Iran. Geiger’s reports describe the collapse of the Shah’s regime and his flight from the country, the return of Imam Khomeini, and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, expressing doubts on Islamic government’s ability to maintain control of the country, warning that it was moving towards civil war and becoming a “new Lebanon” (AGHMRE, 1979b). As illustrated in the review of

declassified documents (see below), the marked anti-communism of Chilean officials, which placed most of its focus on Tudeh party activities and “Soviet influence”, added to the fact that they only relied on English-language press to build their assessments, and generated a distorted perception of the revolutionary process and its actors, which led them to believe that rejection of the Chilean dictatorship among the Iranian people was exclusively due to the action of Marxist groups and “Soviet imperialism”, and that knowledge about the Chilean experience among the masses was limited. The coming events would prove them wrong.

On February 18, Geiger reported the start of the hostage crisis at the US Embassy. In his words “the origin of the governments of several of our countries, together with the propaganda about the participation of the CIA and the US in the movements that imposed them, is being used by Marxist parties and the press to prevent the same from happening here and thwart the revolution” (AGHMRE, 1979a). In a secret plan of action dated April 5, 1979, Ambassador Geiger stated that, with the triumph of the revolution “the result of 2 years of a patient, persistent and planned diplomatic activity, that had us close to the appointment of an Iranian ambassador in Chile, was lost in hours” (AGHMRE, 1979b). He intended to reach out to the new government, see prospects for economic and military cooperation and contact “the new press, radio and TV authorities, considering its manifest leftist inclinations (sic) regarding their treatment (of Chile)” (AGHMRE, 1979b).

The classified report on the first half of 1979 noted that the revolutionary government plans to “maintain normal relations with all countries that do not interfere in the internal affairs of Iran” (AGHMRE, 1979d). Apart from this, Geiger expressed concern about the negative perception generated in Iran regarding the

Chilean dictatorship. The ambassador reported “outbreaks against Chile in media outlets such as state television, radio, and the distribution of tendentious Soviet films” (AGHMRE, 1979d). Specifically, the Soviet film “*Night over Chile*” was exhibited for several weeks in Tehran cinemas. Later on, the ambassador affirmed that he had verified “the sale in public of posters of (Salvador) Allende and related literature” (AGHMRE, 1979e). Greater unease in Geiger was generated by the circulation of cassettes with the song “*El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido*” (The People United Will Never Be Defeated), one of the most universally recognized political songs of all times, composed by the Chilean folk group “Quilapayún” (AGHMRE, 1979f). Moreover, during the revolutionary period, its melody was used along Persian lyrics creating the song “*Barpakhiz*” (Arise).

An important source of concern for Chile was the rapprochement of the new Iranian government with Cuba, beginning with the visit of the Cuban Minister for International Cooperation to Tehran, who transmitted a personal invitation from Fidel Castro to Khomeini to participate in the Summit of Non-Aligned Countries that would take place in Havana in September (AGHMRE, 1979c). According to *The Tehran Times*, when Iranian Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi attended the summit, he issued statements stressing “the Iranian people’s support for all liberation movements in the world, from Chile to South Africa, and especially that of Palestine” (AGHMRE, 1979e), unleashing the annoyance of Geiger, who asked to meet with Yazdi to clarify his statements, and saying him that the coup in Chile was the first “defeat suffered by Marxist imperialism in the whole world” and that the Chilean resistance to Pinochet was “formed, financed, supported and directed abroad by Marxist imperialism” (AGHMRE, 1979e).

On November 18, 1979, the Islamic Revolutionary Council made a statement warning that “foreign colonialism and its dirty internal agents will not simply surrender to the revolution but indulge in plotting and disruption in order to weaken the revolution so much as to overthrow it” (AGHMRE, 1979g). In this context, the revolutionary government explained such destabilization efforts had many precedents, noting that “the experience of Chile and the plotting (against) and weakening of Salvador Allende’s government is before our eyes” (AGHMRE, 1979g), in a declaration that confused officials at the Chilean embassy, as they could not understand why Islamic revolutionaries would cite Allende’s experience as an example, given the socialist nature of that government. Interviewed by the Chilean newspaper “*El Mercurio*”, Geiger expressed his rejection of such a statement, and declared that he would make a formal protest against Iran, but the Foreign Ministry ordered him not to do so (AGHMRE, 1979h).

By then, Ambassador Geiger was severely ill and returned to Santiago from time to time, so in its final days open, the Chilean embassy was mostly run by the Chargé d’Affaires, Jose Cataldo Aviles. On November 8, Chile backed a declaration in support of the release of the US hostages in the permanent council of the Organization of American States (OAS); at the US government request, and with the backing of other Latin American diplomats, the Chilean foreign ministry asked Geiger to take steps in this regard, without success. Geiger recognized the difficulty of his task, noting that “almost the entirety of the (Iranian) people” (*El Mercurio*, 1979, p. C1) backed the hostage-taking.

On December 1st, Cataldo warned that Chile’s support to the US demand for the hostage’s release was seen as “a demonstration of the unconditionality of our government towards (the US), thus



confirming the alleged US intervention in the fall of the Popular Unity (government)” (AGHMRE, 1979i). The situation was reaching a breaking point. Cataldo’s confidential report of December 1979 accused that severe propaganda “alluded to Chile as a capitalist dictatorship under the protection of the United States” (AGHMRE, 1979k). Posters with “portraits of the Hon. Governing Junta (of Chile) together with that of ex-president Somoza of Nicaragua (and) photos of the Vietnam War” (AGHMRE, 1979k) were reportedly placed on the outside walls of the US Embassy. According to official documents, among the slogans of the Iranian students “there was never a lack of reference to Chile” (AGHMRE, 1979k). Cataldo also alerted the arrival of “some telephone calls and anonymous letters (...) with tirades against Chile, imperialism and attempts to intimidate officials” (AGHMRE, 1979j). A secret cable dated December 6, 1979 ordered Ambassador Geiger to begin preparing his departure from Iran to Pakistan and to destroy all confidential material in a discreet manner. The embassy in Tehran would continue to function in order to simulate normality (AGHMRE, 1979j).

By early 1980, Cataldo, now being the only Chilean diplomat in Tehran, charged that Ambassador Geiger's intervention in the hostage crisis had “gave our country a certain negative notoriety in official spheres” (AGHMRE, 1980a). Thus, by the month of April, there were already "frequent unfavorable mentions of our country by the Iranian authorities, branding (the government) as fascist, imperialist and a puppet of the United States and a clear example of what should never happen to the Islamic revolution” (AGHMRE, 1980a). For this reason, the 1980’s plan of action suggested staying “out of any activity that could be seen as supporting the former (Shah's) rule” (AGHMRE, 1980a).

Then, at the end of July, a confusing incident preceded the final rupture: allegedly, members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard attempted to raid Ambassador Geiger's private residency in Tehran, looking for drugs and weapons, as he already left the country. Charge d'Affaires Cataldo quickly went to the place, where the guards informed him that they understood that the Iranian government had already broken relations with Chile more than a month before. Cataldo said that the information was wrong, since he had not been notified of anything (AGHMRE, 1980b). The incident was resolved quickly, but finally, on August 18, 1980, Cataldo was officially informed of the rupture of relations with Chile, and a 15-day deadline was given for all Chilean personnel to leave the country. The Iranian statement was as follows:

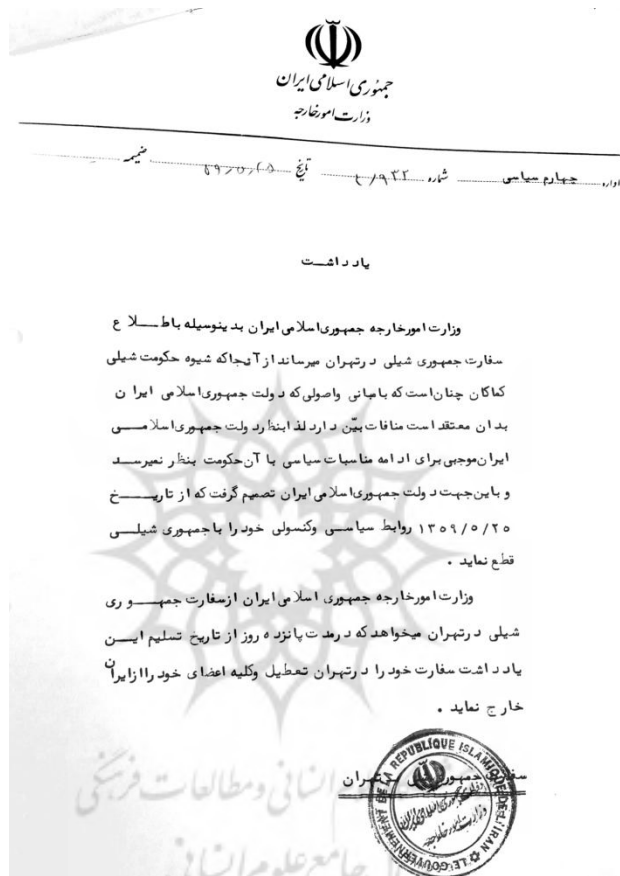
The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran has the honor to inform the Chilean Embassy in Tehran that, as the Chilean system of government does not correspond to the principles and bases of the Iranian government and is inconsistent with them, the Islamic Republic of Iran sees no reason to maintain its ties with Chile and has therefore decided to cut diplomatic and consular relations between the two countries (AGHMRE, 1980c).

The response statement from the Foreign Ministry argued that Chile's intervention in the hostage crisis "has surely allowed pro-Soviet elements in Iran to impose their violently hostile line towards our country" (*El Mercurio*, 1980, p. A1), overlooking the fact that Tehran-Moscow relations were strained at the time by the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. It was also stressed that the economic impact for Chile would be null, since, although "until the end of 1978, Iran provided 30,000 barrels of oil per day to Chile (...) that country had not been delivering crude since 1979" (*El*

*Mercurio*, 1980). The state-owned newspaper, "*La Nación*" (1980a, p. C1), broke the news by accompanying it with a French cartoon depicting Ayatollah Khomeini with the face of Karl Marx. A Chilean diplomatic official described the measure as a "vengeful" and "irrational" move by Khomeini, highlighting Chile's previously good relations with the Shah's regime (*La Nación*, 1980b, p. A1).

Besides acknowledging Chile's close relations with Israel as one of the reasons, Cataldo blamed the decisions taken by the Islamic government mainly on "Soviet influence" and "Marxist infiltrators" within the Iranian Foreign Ministry and not on a decision meditated by the Islamic revolutionaries themselves. He also believed that the days of the Islamic Republic were numbered amid a climate of "chaos" and "anarchy". In that way, the officer concluded that "Chile was once more in the list of countries that Iran has used to hide the failure of a Republic without destiny, which is serving foreign (Soviet) interests" (AGHMRE, 1980c), and forecasting that "the rupture of diplomatic and consular relations with Iran should not affect us greatly, considering the transience of the government regime that decided it" (AGHMRE, 1980c). Figure 2 shows the formal notification of the rupture of diplomatic relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Chile. However, the truth of the matter is that the Pinochet regime left power in 1990, Chile and Iran resumed their diplomatic relations in 1991 and, contrary to Cataldo's assessment, the Islamic Republic not only survived tremendous hardships, but prospered and consolidated itself over the years.

**Figure 2.** The Formal Notification of the Rupture of Diplomatic Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Chile



Source: AGHMRE, 1976a

## 5. The Aftermath: Chile and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

Between 1976 and 1980, the scope of the Chilean anti-communist crusade was hindered by the international context, since it took place in parallel to the process of “détente” between Americans and Soviets (Muñoz, 1982). In addition to this was Pinochet’s direct

clash with the US after the Chilean terrorist attack in Washington in 1976 and the presidency of Jimmy Carter in 1977 (Wilhelmy & Duran, 2003).

In 1976, the so-called “Kennedy Amendment,” which imposed an arms embargo on Chile, had two important consequences. In the first place, it pushed the Chilean dictatorship to strengthen its ties with the supremacist regimes of South Africa and Israel, which became important arms suppliers for Chile (Breto, 1984). Chilean connections with both countries dated back to 1973 and were initially supported by Washington. The Pinochet regime already solidified its ties with Israel by providing the Exocet system in 1975 (Ostrovsky & Hoy, 1990; Contreras, 2019). Moreover, according to his own account, Colonel Contreras visited South Africa in 1976, along with CIA’s Vernon Walters as part of a US-Israel-Chile scheme to assist the Apartheid regime in its fight against Angola, Cuba and Namibian independence rebels. Contreras provided several Mossad-trained Chilean officers to help Pretoria (Contreras, 2019). Thus, a triangle was established between Israel, South Africa and Pinochet’s Chile.

The second consequence was that the US weapons embargo generated momentum for the development of the national military industry, and “in just eight years it went from production for domestic consumption to exports, and managed to occupy a third place in Latin America as an exporter, just behind Brazil and Argentina” (Garcia et al., 1991, p. 153). Displacing the Chilean Army manufacturer, FAMAE, a private company gained strength: Industrias Cardoen (Cardoen Industries), founded in 1976 by businessman Carlos Cardoen, who “together with other explosives and metal-mechanic industrialists, was called in 1978 by the Military Government to cooperate in the production of war

materiel” (Garcia et al., 1991, p. 155). Thus, it was the initial support for the Pinochet regime that enabled Cardoen to develop an export-oriented industry. According to Cardoen himself, “when we began to export, we had both Iran and Iraq as potential clients. The [Pinochet] government decided that we should sell to Iraq” (Faundez, 1991).

Cardoen's business strategy was based on buying patents from European and South African bombs, armored vehicles, helicopter models and other military supplies that he modified to make them as cheap and efficient as possible. The most prominent product in his portfolio was cluster bombs. Cardoen manufactured the “CB-250-K” model, a cluster bomb system capable of saturating an area of 50,000 square meters with explosives. These would be a copy of a model from the International Signal and Control Corporation (ISC), owned by an American partner of Cardoen, who also acquired bomblets for a system called Proteus, manufactured by the South African company Aserma (Garcia et al., 1991).

Once Ronald Reagan assumed office in 1981, Washington approached the Chilean military junta once again and encouraged it to support US allies, such as the Central American anti-communist dictatorships (Kornbluh, 2013) or, in this case, the Iraqi regime. In geopolitical terms, the Iran-Iraq War “exceeded the rules of the Cold War, broke the East/West duality and allowed Saddam Hussein to maintain his alliance with the USSR while developing very close relations with the West” (Martín, 2003, pp. 112-113). In this context, a constellation of states became supporters of the Iraqi war machine, among which, in addition to France and the USSR, were “the US, Great Britain, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Spain, Hungary, Italy, Morocco, Poland, Portugal, the GDR, the FRG, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia” (Martín, 2003, p. 114).

Within this general picture, the Chilean nexus was none other than Carlos Cardoen, who credited himself as being “a fundamental pillar of Iraq's defense” during the war. According to Faundez, “massive weapon and technology shipments from Chile to Iraq (were) directed and run with cooperation of the CIA” (1991, p. 105). Indeed, a Saddam Hussein biographer described Cardoen as “a Chilean with impeccable connections with the CIA” (Aburish, 2000, p. 241), and he even met personally with the Iraqi dictator. In 1991, American weapons dealer Richard Babayan and Israeli officer Ari Ben-Menashe claimed that Chile’s Cardoen Industries, along with South African weapons manufacturers, were two of CIA’s Robert Gates conduits, under William Casey’s orders, to provide outlawed military supplies to the Saddam regime (Faundez, 1991).

As a result, with the approval of Pinochet and Washington, Cardoen Industries began sending cluster bombs to Saddam’s regime, and later began a process of technology transfer and joint production on Iraqi territory. According to investigative journalist Juan Jorge Faundez, Cardoen set up a camp 20 kilometers from Baghdad, which came to house a total of 31 Chilean engineers and technicians who worked as supervisors in Iraqi factories. By 1988, they were in charge of a factory that was capable of producing 500,000 bomblets per month, supervising a contingent of four hundred Iraqi workers (Garcia et al., 1991). Cardoen's intermediary with the Saddam regime, Nasser Beydoun, claimed during a trial against him that the Chilean businessman sold 467 million dollars’ worth of cluster bombs and other equipment to the Iraqi regime between 1982 and 1985 (Sepulveda & Ramirez, 2019). Other publications of the time estimated the volume of its sales at a figure between 200 and 300 million dollars (Garcia et al., 1991).

Allegedly, in the late 1980s, Cardoen also served as an intermediary for the Iraqi intelligence - the Mukhabarat - to obtain the “PROMIS” software, designed to track political opponents (Faundez, 1991). Since he continued to provide supplies to Saddam’s regime during the Gulf War, Cardoen fell from grace in the eyes of Washington and it remains up to this day with an Interpol warrant for illegal exports to Iraq.

In addition to Chile, other Latin American regimes provided military support to the Saddam regime, such as Argentina and Brazil. The latter country also provided several tons of uranium to Iraq in order to boost its nuclear program in 1981 (Garcia et al., 1991).

## 6. Concluding Remarks

As Global South countries, Chile and Iran share attempts of asserting sovereignty and resisting domination, both to the superpowers and to the local autocrats prompted by foreign intervention. 70 years after the coup in Iran, and 50 years after the coup in Chile, this paper attempted to shed light on the little-known relationship between two former US-client regimes and its aftermath. Although during the temporal coincidence between the Pinochet and Shah’s regimes, Chilean-Iranian ties slowly deepened, the Chilean dictatorship never managed to solidify them at the same level as relations with Israel, South Africa or South Korea, despite considering themselves as part of the same side in the “global war against communism”. This deep-rooted anti-communist fervor would lead the Chilean junta to misunderstand the nature of the Iranian revolution and the new guidelines of Iran’s foreign policy under the Islamic Republic. Thus, the diplomatic



break was inevitable, but took decision makers in Chile by surprise, who found no other explanation than to blame an alleged “Marxist infiltration” sponsored by the USSR as the reason behind the rupture.

Despite the fact that much of the documentation and evidence on Chilean-Iranian exchanges, especially those related to the collaboration of the repressive apparatuses of both countries, is inaccessible - since many were destroyed or hidden at the end of Pinochet’s rule, the review of declassified documents from the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs has provided important insight on this regard and on Chilean-Iranian relations as a whole.

Iran and Chile re-established diplomatic relations in 1991. Iran opened its embassy in Chile in 2010, and finally, in late 2016, Chile reopened its embassy in Tehran. Despite this, Iran’s relations with Chile, even in the field of commerce, have not deepened as much as those of the Islamic Republic with other Latin American countries, such as Venezuela, Cuba or Nicaragua, due to the distance, but especially by the influence that Western perceptions on Iran have on the Chilean public opinion and political forces, and due to Chile’s own foreign policy priorities as well. Improving the knowledge between the two peoples may open new bridges to close this gap in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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