Artigo



The State of Israel in the Construction of Argentine Politics through a Prophetic Lens

O Estado de Israel na Construção da Política Argentina sob uma Perspectiva Profética

El Estado de Israel en la Construcción de la Política Argentina desde una Perspectiva Profética

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Argentina's right-wing government's framing of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, focusing on religious symbols in Javier Milei's public image and the broader Libertarian identity project. It examines how Milei integrates Jewish symbols into his political narrative, shaping domestic and foreign policy discourse. Given the role of meaning-making in foreign policy, the study explores how Milei frames Argentina's developments within a "civilizational war," linking them to the Middle East. This prophetic politics presents domestic sacrifice as part of a broader ideological struggle, aligning Argentina's trajectory with the ideological and symbolic narratives surrounding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Key words: Javier Milei; Libertarianism; Right-wing politics; Jewish orthodoxy; Palestine.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa a construção do discurso do governo de direita da Argentina sobre o conflito palestino-israelense, com foco nos símbolos religiosos na imagem pública de Javier Milei e no mais amplo projeto identitário libertário. Examina como Milei incorpora símbolos judaicos em sua narrativa política, moldando o discurso da política interna e externa. Dado o papel da construção de significados na política externa, o estudo explora como Milei enquadra os acontecimentos argentinos dentro de uma "guerra civilizacional", vinculando-os ao Oriente Médio. Essa política profética apresenta o sacrifício doméstico como parte de uma luta ideológica maior, alinhando a trajetória da Argentina às narrativas ideológicas e simbólicas em torno do conflito palestino-israelense.

Palavras-chave: Javier Milei; Libertarianismo; Política de direita; Ortodoxia judaica; Palestina.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la construcción del discurso del gobierno de derecha en Argentina sobre el conflicto palestino-israelí, centrándose en los símbolos religiosos en la imagen pública

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de Javier Milei y en el más amplio proyecto identitario libertario. Examina cómo Milei incorpora símbolos judíos en su narrativa política, moldeando el discurso de la política interna y exterior. Dado el papel de la construcción de significados en la política exterior, el estudio explora cómo Milei enmarca los acontecimientos en Argentina dentro de una "guerra civilizacional", vinculándolos con Medio Oriente. Esta política profética presenta el sacrificio doméstico como parte de una lucha ideológica mayor, alineando la trayectoria de Argentina con las narrativas ideológicas y simbólicas en torno al conflicto palestino-israelí. Palabras clave: Javier Milei; Libertarianismo; Política de derecha; Ortodoxia judía; Palestina.

Introduction

The paper aims at analysing the symbolic substratum at work in how the Argentinean government relates to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Recently, President Javier Milei announced that Argentina would relinquished its historical non-intervention policy by aligning itself to Israel and supporting its "legitimate right to self-defence"2. By doing so, he subscribes to a civilizational war frame³ which allows him to link what is going on in Argentina (the local sphere) with what is at stake in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (the global sphere). In order to understand how such a right-wing political phenomenon has arisen in Argentina, it is worth looking at the uses of religious symbols in the making of prophetic politics narratives (Hanska, 2009)4 and Argentinean

right-wing in-making identity (Saferstein; Gondentul, 2021; Vázquez, 2023). Our objective is to analyse how the Middle East conflict is portrayed in a prophetic style and how this narrative feeds the building of a right-wing libertarian identity. In order to aboard the issue, we analyse the salience of Jewish symbols in the libertarian narrative. Finally, we analyse how these symbols are placed into the frame of an emotionalized religion able to provide meaning in the very realm of politics.

Contextualizing the issue: Judaism and politics in Argentina.

From before its very foundation as a State in 1948, Israel and the Zionist project have impacted in Argentinean politics. As a product of XIXth century mass migration to Argentina, a well-developed and institutionalized Jewish (Kahan, et. al; 2011), Arab and Muslim communities (Montenegro, 2023) dwell into the country. Certainly, Jewish population is estimated in less than 1% of the total population of the country, which is mainly Catholic (63%), Pentecostal (13%) and with no religion (19%) (CEIL, 2019). Nevertheless, because of right-wing nationalist anti-Semitism (Lvovich, 2003; Grinchpun, 2020), integral Catholicism (Mallimaci, 1988) and right-wing PeronistJudeophobia (Besoky, 2018), both Israel and the

² These statement has been pronounced in the context of the ongoing war between Israel and the Hamas Islamist movement. For Israel, it is all about a military incursion aimed at destroying Hamas after the 7th October 2023 attack in which 1200 persons were killed and others were kidnapped. For those who oppose Israel, it is all about an Israeli genocidal practice that started several decades ago. A more nuanced position such as European Union's condemns Hamas but warns Israel about the humanitarian consequences of its military actions.

³ The literature on framing is abundant. It is worth making reference to Benford and Snow (2000) and Entman (1993), between others.

⁴ Several features of Milei resonates with those of prophetic politics as analysed by Hanska: a leader who provides the people he is leading with a unified view of themselves and their existence and an idea of a joint purpose; a dichotomise vision of the future (Gomorrah VS Golden future frame) that warn the people of the alternative future which will become inevitable if the narrated politics are not followed; portrayal of the leader as an outsider to politics.

so called "Jewish question" have historically been a central topic in the political agenda.

The 1994 AMIA (Argentine Israelite Mutual Association) bombing was a watershed in the relationships between Jewishness and politics (Tank-Storper, 2016). Several victims' organizations were founded. From years, ceremonies were held aimed at the searching for Justice (Tolcachier, 2012). Faced with the attack and lack of justice, the State appears as a debtor. At the same time, Jewishness appears as a potential presence in the political scene. As a consequence of the attack, ethnicity takes a political and public dimension as Jews are able to be portrayed as a collective victim. It is true that in the rallies that commemorate of the tragedy, the attack is framed not just in ethnicity, but as a tragedy that involves the all Argentinean society. Nevertheless, the balance between the ethnic and the national framing is not an easy thing to be established (Feldstein; Acosta-Alzuru, 2003; Tolcachier, 2012).

The potential politicization of Jewishness manifested itself during the last years of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's Presidency (2007-2015). The signing of the memorandum between Argentina and Iran, the death of prosecutor Nisman who were in charge of investigating the AMIA bombing, and the discourses looking at denouncing Chancellor Timerman taking into account his Jewish identity, were all elements in the staging of Kirchnerism's decline (Setton, 2021). While the DAIA (Delegation of Argentine Israelite Associations) accused the government, an organization called LlamamientoArgentinoJudío (Jewish Argentine Call) was born and supported Timerman. A split took place inside the Jewish field. This rift not only expressed the plurality of Judaism itself, but the salience of political identities in the making of the Jewish field.

Milei, from celebre enfant terrible to President.

Javier Milei became famous thanks to his provocative interventions in the mass media. The anger, the fury and the raising of tone voice were his very hallmark. By categorizing his opponents as "fucking lefties", he reinstated in the overall common sense the Communist-Capitalist (Liberty) dichotomy. Milei himself was part of a field inside of which several intellectuals criticized the central-right government of *Cambiemos* (2015-2019). By criticizing *Cambiemos* from an extreme right-wing position, a fusion between the right-wing reactionary nationalism and the conservative liberal strand was finally established (Morresi;Saferstein; Vicente, 2021).

Until the rise of Milei, the so called new right had been hegemonized by the PRO party, whose activists refused to be identified either as lefties or righties (Bohoslavsky; Morresi, 2016; Vommaro, 2017). Theirs was a strategy aimed at de-categorized the political field by rejecting the historical categories that used to frame the perceptions of the social actors. Milei did otherwise. He himself is a great categorizer. He identified himself as anarcho--capitalist, a category that used to be strange to Argentinean politics. Milei identifies a wide range of economic and cultural practices as "Communism". For the libertarians and several right-wing intellectuals, Communism is a live force that has to be confronted in the realm of several battlefields, foreign policies being one of them.

Israel in the Libertarian and the right-wing imagery⁵.

Taking into account the rising of right--wing parties in Europe, the United States and Latin America, and the relationship between their leaders and both the Israeli government and Judaism, several papers have been writing aiming at tackle the issue. A brief review of this literature allows us to locate our object study into a wider context. We will focus on such literature that pay attention to the salience of Jewish and national Israeli symbols in the making of political identities. Some foreign policy practices are able to be analysed as symbols, such as the relocation of embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Supporting Israel is not a practice that can only be analysed as pertaining to the domain of foreign policy, but a symbol of a right-wing project of national community building sometimes based on religious principles. For instance, former USA Vice President Mike Pence framed his support to Israel as a kind of religious duty. Notwithstanding the salience of religion in such a discourse, political actors tend to balance between different sources of legitimation. Trump policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been characterized by ambiguity rather than religiously-oriented full support to Israel. These can be confirmed when looking at the statements surrounding the relocation of the USA Embassy to Jerusalem (Eriksson, 2018, pp. 54-55). Milei's proposal on the Embassy issue follows a discursive pattern similar to Trump's. When asked (in Spanish) in X "Will you move the Embassy to Jerusalem?", he simply asked "West Jerusalem"

(July, 9, 2024). By clarifying that it is the western part of the city which is concerned in the proposal, he avoids to intervene in the debate concerning the unification of Jerusalem and its religious connotations.

Supporting Israel has been a task assumed by USA neoconservatism since the 1960s. This cultural, economic and political movement framed the Cold War in a "good VS evil" schema (Durham, 2011, p. 610), linking the support for Israel to the war against Communism, which was labelled as Satanic⁶ (Aiello, 2005). In the late 1970s, the Christian Right emerged as a political actor whose stance regarding Israel echoes those of the neoconservatist, especially in linking anti-communism with pro-israelism. A Christian Zionist brand, which interpreted Middle East affairs in a prophetic way, emerged from these Christian Right. While being associated with opposition to abortion and gay rights, the Christian Zionist encouraged American evangelist to support the settlement policy in occupied West Bank and Gaza (Durham, 2011, p. 612). For them, Israel and Judaism are perceived as western moral barriers against both Islamism and Communism. The supposedly Jewish symbols worked as political artefacts which expressed the values of the Right.

Christian Zionism has spread around Latin America. In 2018, President Jimmy Morales translated the Guatemalan embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This was a policy aimed at building the very identity of Guatemala as an Israel friendly and God-oriented country (Fuentes, 2023). In a pro-Bolsonaro rally, *Tea*

⁵ Libertarianism is but a sub-ideology which can be located in the Right ideological field. This section deals not only with Libertarianism but with the overall Right in order to contextualize Milei's viewpoint into a wider field.

⁶ For Milei, Communism can be labelled as a kind of satanic phenomenon. He accused Pope Francis of being "el maligno" (the evil one) because his economic perspective based on social justice. Besides, Milei subscribes to a viewpoint that sees in the Bible (Book of Samuel) the fundamentals of a capitalist oriented economy and a rejection of statehood.

Party co-founder Michele Bachmann stated that for more than 3500 years, God appointed Jerusalem as the city capital of Israel (Machado, et.al. 2021). Until now, there is no such a religious orientation in Milei's promise to move the Embassy.

Cases such as Guatemala, Brazil and Chile (AranguizKahn, 2022) have been analysed taken into account several issues regarding the relationships between politics and neopentecostalism, the transnational links between conservative Evangelicals, the influx of USA religiosity in Latin America and the portrayal of Jewish and Israeli national symbols in the making of religious-political agendas aimed at supporting "traditional values". Nevertheless, the matter not only relates to evangelism but to the making of Jewish identities. Gherman y Klein (2021) analyses the issue in the context of the recent transformations of racial economy in Brazil and the ongoing identification of Jewishness with whiteness. It was formed an interreligious field that blend conservatives -Christians and Jews- together and split Judaism around political identities. Politics prevail above ethnicity.

The representation of Israel in Milei's discourse do not replicate world-wide libertarian's approach to the issue of Middle East conflict. Murray Rothbard was anti-Zionist (1967). Libertarians do not agree each other on the Middle East conflict (see Futerman; Block, 2024; Durham, 2011). The bone of contention relates to the legitimacy of communitarian property rights. For the individual to be the centre of society, no communitarian property right should be stated. Jewish land property right contradicts this principle because Jewishness is a collective identity. No individual Jew could have proven, in 1948 and

previously, that he owned a piece of land in Palestine (Hoppe, 02/01/2024).

The relationships between conservative libertarianism and Jewishness in Argentina travelled along two different tracks. One of them was the use of Jewish symbols in the political campaign (the sound of the *Shofar*; the Maccabean heroism). Those symbols are part of Judaism but are able to echo in other religions. The "forces of heaven", a symbol taken from 1 Maccabees -a book which, in fact, is not part of the Jewish cannon-, is just a vague reference to God not used at all in Jewish social spaces as synagogues but able to be reapropiated by religions other than Judaism.

Our case study has the particularity of being Milei himself an applicant to become Jew. This second aspect of the Judaization of libertarianism generated the possibility for Jewish social actors to be part of the front stage (Goffman, 1981) of libertarianism. Milei related himself to Jewish orthodoxy, a branch of Judaism that vehemently express support to right-wing Israeli politics.

The public image of Milei is constructed upon the exposure of his ties with Judaism. Even the practices that could be framed as spirituals intertwined with politics. The travel of Milei to the grave of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the late LubavitcherRebbe, is not just a visit to an inspiring religious leader, but to one who shared the same hatred to Communism as Milei. From its very inception, Jewish orthodoxy had a troubled relation with Communism, even before the rise of Stalinist anti-Semitism. The sixth Rebbe of Chabad, IosefItzjakSchneerson (who held office before Menachem Mendel), was persecuted by the Communist regime in the Soviet Union. Nowadays lubavitchers celebrate his deliverance

from soviet prison. Fighting Communism is a core component of Chabad memory. It is said that Menachem Mendel prophesized the fall of the soviet regime (Heilman; Friedmann, 2011). The arrival of the Messiah, he stated, would be preceded by marvellous events such as the fall of Communism. For Milei, the alignment to Orthodox Judaism allows him to be part of a linage which has developed itself in a hatred tension against Communism, either as a rival for the conquer of the Jewish souls at the beginning of the XXth century, either as a victim, either as an early messianic herald of Communist bankruptcy.

Nowadays Lubavitchers portrayed his leader, Menahem Mendel, as the herald of a hard hand politics in the context of Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Schneerson use to criticise the Israeli government for not showing full Israeli power to his enemies. The Rebbe discourse on the matter rested in a rationale other than politic. Prophesy run against political compromise. Similarly, Milei detaches himself of the behaviour that a politician is expected to reproduce. He do not hide his ideology when dealing with political subjects, no matter if he may appear as a man lacking of political rationality. He depicts himself as a giant lion carrying with him a book called "ley bases" (Basic Laws) and followed by little lions, the book representing the core components of his foundational project. It is then possible to verify that a prophetic stand is at the centre of nowadays Argentinean politics. Moreover, the attachment to Israel is a component of a polity framed in a prophetic language that rejects the compromises that a professional politician -a member of a denigrated "casta" (caste), as Milei use to say- is expected to look for.

The alignment with Israel frames itself in an imaginary geography structured upon the liberty-Communism duality. When Milei expresses his support to Israel by stating that Israel has the right of defending itself using whatever means it deems necessary, he adds that "we are on the side of liberty, on the side of the USA, Israel and western Europe" (El tiempo, 6 May, 2024). Is the very concept of *Free world* that Milei resumes when explaining the foreign policy of the libertarian government. His refusal of being part of the BRICS is a strategy of staging his positioning in one of the poles of a world that he imagines as bipolar.

As Gherman and Kim (2021) state, the Israel that the rightist fight for is an imagined Israel. The real Israel is more complex. Certainly, it would be difficult for the Right to sustain the Israel that use to organize LGBT parades. Which is the Israel that Milei admires? An analysis of the address of Rabi Axel Whanish in front of the Senate when explaining his future task if designated ambassador in Israel, could get us closer to the answer.

Whanish spoke largely about the Israe-li "economic miracle". This image, spread through Senor and Singer's book *Start up Nation*, provides an account about the transformation of Israel from a socialist oriented economy to a free market one. By taking this capitalist path, Israel would have become a prosperous country. Most of Whanish's speech was dedicated to identify the benefits for Argentina to associate with such an advanced technological country as Israel.

The benefits of the link with Israel have to do with the use of its technology and the acquisition of the culture that is behind that development. Our challenge is to invest in future technology. In that, Israel can be one of the most beneficial partners for Argentina. (YOUTUBE Senado Argentina, March, 21, 2024).

Unlike Christian Zionism and its religious justifications for being close to Israel such as "those who bless Israel will be blessed", the Rabi spoke about advanced technology and avoided to speak on religious terms.

Behind the idea of economic miracle underlies a teleology of capitalism. Like the LubavitcherRebbe, Israel would also have defeated socialism. It was not an external socialist force but its inner tendencies to this ideology. But it is not just about economics. Milei presidency defines itself in such a term as "cultural revolution". Those who support the government think that Argentina is now experiencing deep changes. The logic behind supporting Israel do not lay down in a restricted political rationale, but in a moral one based on the clear distinction between good and evil. By taking sides with Israel, Argentina would align itself with an order which is not just social or geopolitical, but a cosmic one. When confronted with the idea that translating the embassy to Jerusalem would jeopardize Argentina, the supporters of Milei state that the real moral fault would be showing feelings of fears in face of terrorism.

In this sense, Whanish shows himself as a spokesman of this moral revolution that incorporates a clear advocacy of Israel face the October 7th Hamas's attack.

Milei brings moral clarity. It was a question of terrorism versus civilization, and barbarism versus democracy, and a decision had to be made. Milei made a commitment by including Hamas as a terrorist organization in Argentina. When right and wrong are so clear, you cannot remain neutral. (Infobae, March, 6, 2024). Again, it is not religion that provides the rationale for this policy, but morality.

Jewishness provides a source of symbols by which the libertarian project portray the moral revolution supposedly at place in Argentina. By giving a Chanukah candelabrum as a present to Ukrainian President Zelensky, Milei stages his positioning in the geopolitical arena. By lighting a candle in the ChabadLubavitch public celebration of Chanukah, Milei stages the Libertarian account of History. So, the Chanukah light represents the liberation from decades of populist (ie. Socialist, Peronist⁷) obscurantism.

Unlike other cases where Christian Zionism works as a core component of pro-Israeli policy, such an evangelical component is absent in ours. It is not in evangelical meetings that this policy is celebrated, but in Jewish ones. Pro-Israelism has no relation with the Christianisation of the society, as in the other cases. Neither has any relation whit Judaization. In fact, Jewish leaders use to state that Judaism is but a supplier of moral values for the politic. The condition for a minority ethnic religion to sustain a national political project lies down in its reduction to morality and spirituality.

Judaism provides the symbols for a prophetic politic to be staged. By weeping in the Western Wall, Milei constructs leadership as he shows himself as an "authentic" man. Even though emotion is not a core component of Orthodox Judaism which, in fact, emphasizes more in the attachment to divine commandments (*Mitzvot*) than in feelings and emotional commotion, the weeping Milei feeds the prophetic component of the libertarian project. The prophet is touched by God, so he

⁷ Peronism is a political identity that was born in the 1940s, aiming at representing the working class and looking for an alliance between this class and the national bourgeoisie. For some liberals politicians and intellectuals, the decline of Argentina is mostly due to Peronism.

weeps. He shows how close to God he is. The feat of the prophet is full of emotions, battles and acts of heroism all supported by a clear distinction between good and evil. In this case, prophetic politics and emotionalized religion goes together.

Conclusion

For decades, Catholicism has been a core component of Argentinean politics. The salience of Jewish symbols and the very presence of Jewish religious leaders in the spiritualization of a political project is something that has not been seen before. This shows how Judaism and Israel are imagined by the Right. It is clear that Jewish orthodoxy is a branch of Judaism that has been experiencing a revival. The revival of right-wing Judaism intermingled with the rise of libertarianism. Between them, elective affinities are established. As far as Jewish symbols can be integrated in a shared language by which, for instance, the lighting of a candle is able to be understood not as a Jewish ritual but as a metaphor of what is going on in the nation and the all world, Judaism will be able to provide spiritual support to a political project that sees itself as a moment of nationhood re-foundation full of sacrifices. Supporting Israel, as long as this support is framing in a good V.S. evil dichotomy, becomes a moment of libertarian and right-wing spiritualization.

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