

Policy Paper

**Building Solidarity for Palestine
in Latin America**

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Summary

- Palestinians and Latin Americans have been linked by a common resistance to foreign domination and vision of independence.
- Traditionally, much of Latin America's support for Palestine has come from the left of the political spectrum; this is no longer the case. Israel's unwillingness to end its occupation has evoked support from across the political divide.
- The main areas of support are emanating from the Palestinian Diaspora in Latin America; the Native American peoples; Latin American governments; and the social movements spearheaded by the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.
- By themselves, the countries of Latin America cannot emancipate Palestine but they can contribute through the formation of alliances and intensification of South-South cooperation.
- The Palestinian leadership and people must harness this strategically important source of support.

Overview

For more than 100 years, Palestinians and Latin Americans have been linked by a common aspiration for independence. That relationship is set to continue well into the 21st century as Latin America's transformative projects evolve and begin to impact on global affairs. There are four major channels through which solidarity for the Palestinian cause will be advanced: the Palestinian Diaspora in Latin America; the Native American peoples; Latin American governments; and the social movements spearheaded by the BDS movement.

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Dr. Abdullah lectured in history at the University of Maiduguri in Nigeria (1990-1993) and at Birkbeck College, University of London (2003-08). He was also senior researcher at the Palestinian Return Centre, London from 1996-2009.

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One of the most fascinating features of the changes taking place in Latin America today is that they are being driven from the bottom up, largely by social movements, including environmentalists, farmers' associations, adult education institutions and Native American activists. This represents a marked departure from the 20th century models of change, which were inspired largely by either revolutionary upheavals or guerrilla warfare; apart from the Cuban revolution, none have succeeded.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the popular uprisings which swept the region in 2011–2012 promised a realignment of the relations between the masses and those who govern them. Everywhere, the primary demands were respect for the will of the people, social justice and accountability. With the exception of Morocco, and Tunisia to a lesser degree, these attempts to usher-in democratic systems have all descended into insurgencies and civil war.

In Latin America, the process of change has been accompanied and hastened by the decline of US hegemony. The waning of US influence coincided with the rise of China as a major trading partner in the region; Chinese trade was worth \$180 billion in 2010, increasing eighteen-fold from 2000. On the other hand, while American influence across the Middle East remains generally strong, especially in Israel/Palestine, it is now challenged by an increasingly assertive Russia.

Furthermore, while the demise of US hegemony in Latin America was accompanied by the rise of the new left with its own brand of socialism, the incomplete processes in the Middle East have been driven by the rise of political Islam.

As the international community edges towards an increasingly multi-polar world, and with the growing influence of the Global South in the international arena, the powers that have long managed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are looking ever more redundant. The importance of the Global South's advance has been exemplified by its involvement and support for Palestine at the United Nations (UN).

At this critical juncture of the Palestinian people's struggle for self-determination, the importance of Latin America's relationship with Palestine has become increasingly important. The Israeli offensive against Gaza Strip in the summer of 2014 launched a wave of solidarity from several Latin American countries, with some going so far as to expel Israeli diplomats and recall their own ambassadors from Tel Aviv.

The Palestinian Diaspora

Ever since the early 20th century, Palestinians have migrated and settled throughout Latin America. That process was accelerated considerably after the *Nakbah* (catastrophe) of 1948, when three-quarters of the Palestinian population



were dispossessed of their land and forced into exile in a planned act of ethnic cleansing by Zionist-Jewish militias and terror groups.

There are now an estimated 700 thousand people of Palestinian descent living in Latin America. They constitute the largest concentration of Palestinians outside the Arab world, and are in Chile and Honduras in particular.

In recent years, a number of Palestinians have risen to the highest ranks of political office in their adopted countries, with Carlos Flores Facuss, President of Honduras from 1998 to 2002; Elias Saca Gonzalez, President of El Salvador from 2004 to 2009; Said Wilbert Musa, Prime Minister of Belize from 1998 to 2008; and Yehude Simon Munaro, Prime Minister of Peru from 2008 to 2009.

The Palestinian Diaspora has become so entrenched and integrated politically that in the case of El Salvador two Palestinians, Elias Antonio Saca, of the well-known Saca family from Bethlehem, and Shafik Handal, a founding member of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, contested the presidency in 2004. Though defeated, Handal was, undoubtedly, one of the most celebrated of Palestinians in Latin America. His parents, Giries Abdullah and Gamile Handal, were Catholic Palestinians who had migrated to El Salvador in the 1920s; they were also from Bethlehem.

Between 1975 and 1979 Israel became the main supplier of weapons to the right-wing Salvadorian government. In retaliation, in 1979 guerrillas kidnapped and killed Israel's honorary consul to San Salvador, Ernesto Liebes. The country was by then descending rapidly into a state of civil war under the government led by the National Conciliation Party (PCN), which represented the military and business interests. It opposed communism and Cuban influence in Central America and was by default a staunch supporter of US policy in the region.

Handal's personal background and influence within the guerrilla movement came to light when the South African ambassador to El Salvador was kidnapped in November 1979. The guerrillas demanded the severance of all government ties with Israel and South Africa, as well as recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Being a member of the FMLN General Command, Handal was partly responsible for the procurement of weapons for the movement. In 1981 he was reported to have visited Beirut for a meeting with the late PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat.

As it stands, members of the Palestinian Diaspora in Latin America are well positioned to mobilise support for their compatriots in the homeland. In Chile, that has been witnessed in the activities of the Palestinian community, the largest in Latin America.² In 1984, the Palestinian Club of Chile and the Federation of Brazilian-Palestinian Associations called for the first congress of Palestinian

² D. Khatib, "Palestinians present more than ever in Latin American politics," site of Aljazeera.net, 9/8/2014.

entities from Latin America and the Caribbean. That led to the creation of the Latin American Confederation of Palestinian Institutions (COPLAC). The groundwork has thus been laid and it is now left to policy-makers to build upon and collaborate effectively with these bodies.

The Indigenous Peoples

The potential for engagement between Native American peoples and Palestinians in the 21st century has been shaped by their common history. The activities of Palestinians like Handal and those who rose to high office have reverberated among the indigenous peoples of the region. At the heart of this natural empathy that allowed the Palestinian cause to resonate among Native Americans was their common experience of losing their territory, state repression, colonialism and racism.³

The fact that both groups were categorised as racially undesirable by *criollos* (“whites” or Latin Americans of confirmed Spanish descent) created a de facto platform of common interests between them.

Many of the Native American groups that were formed to resist foreign intrusion were, like their Palestinian counterparts, criminalised in an attempt to deny their rights.⁴

Indigenous movements have, in recent years, been among the most vocal supporters of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination. In many parts of Latin America long decades of trade in rural areas have resulted in a spirit of understanding and mutual solidarity. Palestinian merchants who engaged in trade in rural areas often learnt local languages and gave loans and credit on terms that were much better than their European counterparts. In Peru, for example, some of the Palestinians even learned Quechua before Spanish.⁵

Unlike the *criollos*, the Palestinian traders did not compete with the indigenous people for their land. They chose instead to focus on trade and commerce. In the long run, they helped indigenous communities to overcome their commercial and financial dependence on large landowners.

Support from Latin American Governments

For most of the period from the *Nakbah* to the end of the 1970s Israel enjoyed unreserved diplomatic support from Latin American countries. With the exception

³ C. Baeza, “Palestinians and Latin America’s Indigenous Peoples Coexistence, Convergence, Solidarity”, *Middle East Report*, Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), Vol. 45, No. 274, spring 2015.

⁴ R. Robideau, “Palestine and Native America,” site of CounterPunch, 1/2/2006.

⁵ Baeza, *op. cit.*



of Cuba, all Latin American countries supported Israel consistently in international forums.⁶

Given that these countries were joined together in the Organization of American States (OAS), which was dominated by the US, it seemed natural that they should support Israel. Indeed, Israel was granted the unique honour of becoming a Permanent Observer at the OAS. The only other non-local country to be afforded this honour has been Spain.

Nevertheless, the Palestinians were not without important friends in Latin America. Ernesto Che Guevara's historic visit to Gaza Strip in 1959 was one of the earliest indicators of the potential to transform the Palestinian cause into a global struggle against colonialism. He was invited by Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had raised the issue of Palestine at the 1955 Bandung Conference, which led to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

During a visit to al-Bureij refugee camp, Che showed no particular interest in the prevailing poverty and destitution. Instead, he told his hosts, "You should show me what you have done to liberate your country. Where are the training camps? Where are the factories to manufacture arms? Where are people's mobilisation centres?"⁷

As a result of the visit the new revolutionary government in Cuba adopted the Palestinian cause and has remained a principal supporter of Palestinian rights ever since. Although Cuba was never in a position to offer significant financial support, it has over the years offered scholarships to Palestinian students. Many other countries have followed Cuba's lead and the region remains a rich source for the acquisition of advanced skills in medicine, engineering and technology.

Latin American support for Palestine was also demonstrated during and after the recent Israeli offensives against the Gaza Strip in 2008/9, 2012 and 2014. Every successive attack stirred heightened solidarity, with some countries going so far as to expel Israeli diplomats and recall their ambassadors from Tel Aviv. In Bolivia, President Evo Morales's reaction surpassed that of all other Latin American leaders. During the 2014 attack he severed diplomatic ties with Israel, endorsed the BDS movement, described Israel as a "terrorist state" and denounced Israeli "apartheid" and "genocide in Gaza".

President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela was equally strong in his condemnation of the Israeli attack; he "condemned the actions of the illegal state of Israel against the heroic Palestinian people." Simultaneously, the presidents of Uruguay, Brazil,

⁶ R. Sharif, "Latin America and the Arab-Israeli conflict," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Institute for Palestine Studies, Vol. VII, No.1, autumn 1977, p. 98.

⁷ S. Abu Sitta, "Che Guevara in Gaza: Palestine becomes a Global Cause," site of Middle East Monitor (MEMO), 20/7/2015.

Argentina and Venezuela issued a joint statement calling for a cessation of violence and an end to the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip.⁸

Other countries in the region also waded in with political and humanitarian support. El Salvador, Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Brazil all withdrew their ambassadors from Israel in protest.

The ability of Latin American countries to pursue or adopt foreign policies independent of Washington is to a large extent linked to the decline of US hegemony in the region. That process was accompanied by the rise of China as a major trading partner; Chinese trade was worth \$180 billion in 2010, increasing eighteen-fold from 2000. At the same time US exports to the region dropped from 55% in 2000 to 32% in 2009.

There is an obvious lesson here for Palestine and its regional supporters, namely that the attainment of political independence will remain forever elusive where there is economic dependence. It is no secret that the Palestinian Authority's financial and political dependence on the US has often been used as a means to extract political concessions for Israel's benefit. Similarly, the ability of countries like Egypt and Jordan to support the Palestinian cause has been curtailed severely by their dependence on US aid.

In 2005, President Luíz Inácio da Silva called for a summit of South American and Arab countries in Brazil. Most Arab states, especially those aligned closely with Washington, failed to attend. It would thus be an achievement if present relations with Latin America could be developed for such collaboration. The revival of this project could well serve as a mechanism to help Palestine.

One of the means adopted by the new left to reduce US influence in Latin America has been the formation of regional groupings of various kinds. In this way, they have managed to bypass the moribund OAS. Perhaps Arab countries should explore similar formations since their dysfunctional regional bodies have failed to become effective vehicles to advance the Palestinian cause.

The new left governments that have gained power in Latin America are uniquely different from those of the 20th century, wherein revolutionaries sought, in examples of genuine Leninist dogma, to destroy the state; the new socialists like Chavez, Morales and Correa, however, have chosen to use the structures and organs of the state to advance their cause. Chavez, for example, worked for many years to transform the military from being the guardian of imperial interests to become the guardian of the people's interests. In contrast, the security forces of the Palestinian Authority have, since their inception, been used to protect the interests and security of the Israeli occupation instead of their own people.

If the new socialist projects are to succeed in Latin America they cannot ignore or deny the importance of religion. A strict adherence to the Marxist dictum that

⁸ Baeza, *op. cit.*



“religion is the opium of the people” would certainly alienate and exclude the overwhelming majority of Latin Americans who are staunch Roman Catholics. Given that Latin America has been the incubator of the teachings of liberation theology it is understandable why the current governments, most notably including Cuba, have abandoned their old hostility toward the church and decided to harness the latent social power of the institution as a vehicle for social justice and equality.

The situation in the Middle East is markedly different, as if the region has remained stuck in its past prejudices. One of the main reasons for the abandonment of the Arab uprisings has been the collaboration of leftist and nationalist parties with elements of the old regimes. Several governments declared Islamist parties to be “terrorist” organizations, froze their assets where possible and ostracised their members. The Islamic Resistance Movement in Palestine (Hamas), which was itself listed as a “terrorist organization” by the Egyptian government (it was taken off list later), may well benefit from the experiences of the advocates of liberation theology in Latin America.

Popular Movements

Latin America now offers an opportunity to discover ways of how social change is brought about from below by social movements. With regard to Palestine the movements which are at the heart of the ongoing changes focus their solidarity on human rights issues and not the discredited “peace process.” There are, however, constant threats of destabilisation in the countries at the forefront and it is widely believed that if right-wing governments return to power in Latin America this would be a setback for the Palestinian cause.

After 10 years of relentless international campaigning, the BDS movement is finally beginning to reap the fruits of its labour. In Latin America this is becoming increasingly evident as civil society pressure has forced the collapse of several major state contracts with Israeli companies, especially those involved in the sale of weapons and military technology in the region.

Despite determined efforts by Zionist organizations to stifle debate, discussion of Palestine is now mainstream in many parts of Latin America. In Brazil, academic courses on Palestine are being developed at universities and there is much more discussion in the media. According to Professor Ilan Pappé, the Israeli-born historian, “In Latin America, there are no hang-ups, no layers of guilt” such as there are in the West, so charges of “anti-Semitism” are a much less potent weapon against critics of Israel and its colonial policies.⁹

There are, of course, major obstacles ahead given the extent of economic and military ties with Israel, which are strong in many countries. While Guatemala,

⁹ H. Wise, “Latin American solidarity with Palestine at all-time high,” site of Middle East Eye, 27/8/2015.

Chile and Colombia all rely heavily on Israeli drone technology, Brazil remains one of Israel's biggest clients, not just in terms of arms sales but also in the training of its "special forces."

Since the 1970s, Israel has been involved in the arming of dictatorships in Central and South America. In Colombia, it has provided training for paramilitary forces, including the militias of narcotics cartels. The role continues today, with Israeli involvement in Mexico, Honduras and the Dominican Republic.¹⁰

Even so, there is today a huge network of grassroots organizations working together across Latin America to promote the boycott of companies involved in the occupation. Tapping into the many millions of Facebook and Twitter users in the region, the network has major projects in hand, such as the "Olympics without apartheid" campaign which will challenge Israel's participation in the 2016 games in Rio de Janeiro.

Furthermore, with the coming of the digital age, internet and satellite TV, Latin American audiences are no longer quarantined from events in the Middle East. News is beamed into their homes in real time and this has helped to change perceptions. It was no surprise, therefore, that during its 2014 onslaught on the Gaza Strip Israel carried out 72 attacks on journalists, killing 17 in the process.

Thus it remains important for maximum use to be made of the media. As former UN Secretary General Kofi Anan once said, "Information is liberating." Al-Jazeera network, which for more than a decade has operated a regional bureau in Caracas, has contributed immensely. That role must be continued, given the importance of information to dispel myths and drum up support for Palestine.

The big corporations like Reuters, CNN, American Press and Agence France Press no longer have the monopoly and this has created something of a level media playing field. The Zionist narrative does not hold sway any more in these parts; the citizen journalists who work the internet today have gradually shifted the balance.

The myths and fallacies of Israeli democracy have now been exposed. Israel is seen clearly as an apartheid state and it is this argument that must dominate the public discourse.

There is scope to tap into popular anti-apartheid support in Latin America and the Caribbean. The hated system brings back bad memories of oppression and racial supremacy, so people will support anti-apartheid campaigns and oppose Israel.

¹⁰ Ibid.



Conclusion

Historically, Palestinians and Latin Americans have been joined by their common resistance to colonial rule and struggle for independence. Throughout the second half of the 20th century much of Latin America's support for Palestine came from the left of the political spectrum. In recent years, however, Israel's refusal to end its brutal military occupation has galvanised growing support from across the political divide.

A central feature of current developments in Latin America is the attempt to build democratic systems. For the leaders of countries like Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, control of the organs of the state is only part of the transformative process. Their greater challenge in the 21st century is how to engage with a globalised social-economic and communicative system and yet avoid the dominance of transnational capital and its local agents.

In the long term, the countries of Latin America cannot by themselves overcome the existing global power structures that maintain the dominance of the rich North over the South. Nor will they by themselves emancipate Palestine from the clutches of Israeli colonialism. They can, however, contribute to the cause through the formation of alliances and intensification of South-South cooperation. That process has to some extent already begun and must be consolidated.

In normal circumstances negotiations would always be the preferred method for conflict resolution. The case of Palestine has bucked the trend, though. Negotiations became an end in themselves and not a means to an end. Two decades of US-sponsored talks have resulted in the expansion of Israel's settler-occupation of Palestinian land and the emergence of an Israeli brand of apartheid rule.

Wherever it exists, apartheid is by legal definition a crime against humanity. In Latin America there is growing revulsion, both at the governmental and popular levels, with Israeli apartheid. The social movements which are at the heart of the changes taking place in Latin America are now taking the lead in making the case for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel. It is now left to the Palestinian leadership to harness this strategically important source of support.

ورقة بحثية

بناء التضامن مع فلسطين في أمريكا اللاتينية

د. داود عبد الله

