



# Israeli Relations with Latin America



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## Introduction

Latin America includes 33 member states of the United Nations, 17% of its members. This geopolitical region is made up of three sub-regions, namely the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. It constitutes 8.4% of the world’s population, and according to the International Monetary Fund estimates, its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (purchasing power parity—ppp) constitutes 8.1% of the global GDP.<sup>1</sup>

## First: History of Israeli Relations with Latin America

The history of Israeli-Latin America relations can be divided into several stages:

### First Stage: Mutual Recognition<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps, the first diplomatic contribution of Latin American countries to the Arab-Zionist conflict was via the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP). It examined the issue of the partition of Palestine in 1947. Guatemala and Uruguay were among its members and were strong supporters of the partition decision. When UN General Assembly voted for the partition plan, 13 Latin American countries (out of 20 countries then) voted for the plan and one Latin American country voted against. In 1949, when Israel was admitted to the UN, 18 Latin American countries voted for the decision.<sup>3</sup>

Afterwards the diplomatic recognition of Israel continued among Latin American countries. Argentina under Juan Perón abstained from voting on the partition project, but it was the first country among Latin American countries to open an embassy in Tel Aviv, followed by Brazil and Uruguay. As for Guatemala, it was the first to open a diplomatic mission in Jerusalem in 1955. In the 1960s, there were 14 Latin American embassies in Israel, including ten missions in Jerusalem. As a result of the common relations and tendencies of some Latin American countries with the Nasserist trends in Egypt, their relations with Israel was affected, as was clearly the case during the first rule of the Peronist governments 1946–1955 and afterwards.<sup>4</sup>



Juan Perón

In 1960, the first clear tension between a Latin American state and Israel occurred, when the Israeli intelligence kidnapped the “Nazi officer” Adolf Eichmann from Argentina. The latter filed a complaint to the UN considering what Israel did illegal. The crisis ended later, when Israel executed Eichmann in 1962, cremated his body and his ashes were scattered in the sea.<sup>5</sup>



Adolf Eichmann

After the 1967 war, 20 Latin American countries submitted a draft resolution to the UN calling for the withdrawal of Israel, ending the state of war, and establishing conditions of coexistence based on good-neighbourliness. The resolution was rejected, however, it constituted one of the bases of the famous UN Security Council Resolution 242.

### **Second Stage: Conflictual Relationships<sup>6</sup>**

From 1968 to early 1990s, Latin America was swept by changes in political regimes, to become more leftist to a varying degree. This took place in Peru, Chile, Argentina and Nicaragua, which joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) alongside Cuba, and 15 new countries that appeared in the Caribbean during the same period. In general, the policies of these countries became hostile to the Israeli policy and closer to the Arab and Palestinian orientations. Nonetheless, some of Israel's relations, especially



with Central American countries, remained intact, while the US encouraged Israel to provide military aid to these countries, especially those with some internal instability such as Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica.

In the post-Arab-Israeli war in 1973, the oil crisis and its prices played a role in furthering Arab-Latin American rapprochement. Some countries cut their diplomatic ties with Israel (Cuba 1973, Guyana 1974 and Nicaragua 1982), and there were several factors behind this:

- a. Some Latin American countries had to go along with the Arab policies towards Israel, so as to ensure that the Arabs would take their interests into account during the oil crisis (This was evident in the case of Brazil and other non-oil producing countries).
- b. Some oil-producing countries in Latin America (Venezuela, Ecuador and Mexico) found their interest in further coordination with Arab countries through the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).
- c. The role of Arab immigrants in Latin America has relatively strengthened Arab relations with this continent, which was reflected in allowing the opening of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) offices (Cuba, Nicaragua, Peru, Mexico, Brazil and Bolivia).<sup>7</sup> Some Latin American countries supported the draft UN resolution considering Zionism a racist movement (Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, Grenada and Guyana), which was opposed by 10 countries, while 11 countries abstained. The 12 Latin American countries that have embassies in Jerusalem responded to the UN Security Council's rejection of an Israeli decision to annex Jerusalem in 1980, and they even moved their embassies to Tel Aviv, but afterwards some countries (Costa Rica in 1982 and El Salvador in 1984) returned their embassies to Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>





### Third Stage: The Impact of Arab Normalization on the Latin American Position<sup>9</sup>

With the conclusion of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979, the cracks in the Arab diplomatic wall widened, and the Arab reconciliation with Israel expanded, which was an excuse for the Latin American countries to review their positions towards Israel. The Latin American countries opened up rapidly to the Israelis, and reciprocal visits began between Israeli leaders and some leaders of that region. By early 1990s, Israel had 18 embassies in Latin America, started to provide technical assistance to some of these countries, and hosted hundreds of Latin American trainees in various fields (especially from Central America and the Caribbean).

Some researchers believe that since 2009 former Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, played an important role in enhancing the Latin American relations with Israel, when he visited Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Colombia. He attended a memorial marking the 15th anniversary of the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires that killed dozens (Argentine officials claim Iran orchestrated the attack and that Hizbullah agents carried it out), while aiming at “curbing the growing Iranian influence in that region.” Benjamin Netanyahu reinforced this trend, as he visited Latin America four times during the 2017–2020 period. His visits included many countries with focus on the main ones, such as Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, etc.<sup>10</sup>



Avigdor Lieberman



Donald Trump

When Jair Bolsonaro became the president of Brazil, it was a turning point for the right-wing pro-Israel movements. This has reflected in the positions of the most important Latin American countries, where Bolsonaro supported the positions of US President Donald Trump, regarding Jerusalem as the united capital of Israel, and pledged to move the Brazilian



Jair Bolsonaro



embassy there. Furthermore, in 2019, he visited Israel, reflecting clear bias towards Israel and a shift away from the traditional Brazilian positions, a position consistent with those of the Evangelical movement (Protestant conservatives). However, Bolsonaro faced pressure from Brazilian economists, who feared that the embassy move to Jerusalem might harm Brazil's trade interests with the Arabs. For Brazil is the top meat exporter to the Arab world, worth of \$5 billion annually, out of \$16 billion, the total meat exports to the Middle East, whereas its total trade with Israel does not exceed 3% of its total trade with the rest of the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the recent wave of Arab normalization provided Bolsonaro with an excuse to proceed with his policies.<sup>12</sup>

## **Second: The Future of Latin American Relations with Israel**

The main variables affecting Latin American policies towards Israel are the following:<sup>13</sup>

### **1. Rival Political Forces Within Latin America**

These forces are represented by the Evangelicalism movement, the military, and the left-wing movements.

The emergence of the Catholic “Liberation Theology” movement in the 1960s was a cause for US concern, especially since it focuses on economic and social dimensions, which was considered by the US as leftist activism. In response, the Evangelical Movement in Latin America began to receive support from US official bodies, including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), so as to counter the Liberation Theology movement and the leftists.<sup>14</sup>



Although Latin America is generally Catholic, various studies indicate that between 1995 and 2017, 10 countries saw their shares of Catholics reduced by 22–39%. The decline has been especially substantial in Central America. High percentage of the populations; Guatemala (41%), Honduras (39%), Nicaragua (32%), Brazil (30%) and Panama and Costa Rica (25%)

regard themselves as Evangelicals. In the 1980s and 1990s, Guatemala saw the first two Evangelical heads of state in Latin America. This increasingly central role of evangelical churches is due to the growing dissatisfaction with democracy and the marked deterioration of traditional political parties and democratic institutions. Other elements to be borne in mind are, first, the strong presence of pentecostalist and neo-pentecostalist denominations among the masses, helped by the withdrawal of left-wing parties and the Roman Catholic church, and the continued role of the military institution.<sup>15</sup> Most of the expansion of Pentecostal movement takes place in Latin America, especially in Central America.<sup>16</sup>

Evangelists, especially the Pentecostal movement share some Jewish traditions, for both have the same expectations of the imminent “Second Coming of Christ” and the rebuilding of the temple. Hence, we have the Jewish Shavuot and the Christian Pentecost festivals.<sup>17</sup>

However, this does not negate the fact that there are elites in Latin American who oppose Israeli policies. For 320 officials from Latin America have called for sanctions against Israel if it annexes West Bank.<sup>18</sup>

It is noticed that Israeli relations with Latin America are greatly affected by the nature of the ruling party. For example, in 2009, Bolivian left-wing government cut all ties with Israel after Israel’s offensive in Gaza, then Bolivia restored these relations after President Morales resigned and fled to Mexico after political unrest.<sup>19</sup>

## **2. Economic Relations**

Trade between Latin America and Israel is manifested through:<sup>20</sup>

- a. A Free Trade Agreement between Mexico and Israel, concluded in 2000. This two-way trade amounted to \$700 million in 2015, a 300% increase. In 2018, an Israeli water desalination company announced a plan to build a seawater desalination plant in Mexico, which is estimated to be operational by 2021.



b. A trade agreement with the economic and political bloc (Mercosur) in 2005, comprising Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela, which has joined the bloc in 2012. Mercosur was established in 1991, then expanded later. In 2019, Mercosur had a combined GDP of roughly \$3.4 trillion



c. In 2014, Israel was accepted as an observer state of the Pacific Alliance, a Latin American trade bloc that consists of Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Peru and Costa Rica. Israel exports around \$900 million worth of goods to the Pacific Alliance annually.

d. Israeli trade with Central and South America (excluding Mexico) was worth \$1.5 billion in 2017, a \$100 million increase from 2016.

### 3. Military Relations

The Israeli military industry began to take on a commercial character in international markets in 1967, and has developed rapidly due to western countries assistance. In the early stages, Latin America was one of the most important markets for this Israeli industry, whose trade 18 Latin American countries amounted to \$1.2–2 billion until 1981.<sup>21</sup>

In 2012–2017, military exports to Latin America decreased from \$604 million to \$550 million. For Colombia, the highest purchaser from Israel, decreased its purchases when it made an agreement with the opposition Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), thus reducing its need for Israeli weapons.



The decline in the Israeli arms trade in Latin America comes at a time the military expenditures in Latin American countries amounted to \$60.4 billion in 2010. The Latin American countries with the largest military spending are Venezuela, Chile and Ecuador. From 2003 to 2007, Israel represents 3% of Chile's total of arms imports, and 2% of Venezuela's.<sup>22</sup> In 2018, 6% of Israeli defense exports were to Latin America, i.e., \$450 million,<sup>23</sup> whereas

in 2019, it became 4%.<sup>24</sup> It is noted that Israel is globally the 8th largest exporter of major arms, whose share of arms exports in 2014–2018 reached 3.1%, while it was 2.1% in 2009–2013.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Israel’s defense exports amounted to \$7.2bn in 2019, down from \$7.5bn in 2018 and \$9.2bn in 2017. Nevertheless, it has nearly doubled its surveillance technology sales, which constituted 14 % of its total exports in 2019, compared to 8% in 2018.<sup>26</sup>

#### **4. The Role of the Arab and Jewish Minorities in Latin America**

According to available statistics, the number of Jews in Latin America is about 470 thousand, most of them live in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. Despite the increase in the population of these countries, the number of Jews could decrease to 460 thousand in 2050, especially if the current immigration pace to Israel continues.<sup>27</sup>

Israeli relations with Latin America had been affected by the rise of left-wing movements that we referred to earlier. During the 1999–2020 period, the leftist “pink tide” dominated important countries such as Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina and 12 other countries, in addition, the governments of 8 Latin American countries are currently considered leftists.<sup>28</sup> Despite the recession of this tide early 2010, it re-appeared in the 2018–2020 period, in Mexico, Panama, Argentina and Bolivia. Such changes constitute an obstacle to the growing role of Israel or the Jewish lobby,<sup>29</sup> not to mention the impact of the Cuban anti-Israel position, known since the 1960s.



The pro-Israel groups are trying to curb the leftist movements that support the Palestine issue, the most prominent of these are the Brazilian Israelite Confederation (Confederação Israelita do Brasil—CONIB), the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina—AMIA), Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas—DAIA) and the Jewish Community of Chile (Comunidad Judía de Chile—CJCH).





As for the Arab community, its population estimates vary widely among various sources between 13 and 30 million,<sup>30</sup> most of them are of Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian descent, along with other Arabs. The number of Palestinians is about 600 thousand, most of them are in Chile (300 thousand), El Salvador (about 100 thousand), Honduras (about 80 thousand) and Brazil (about 50 thousand). This is approximately the same number of Jews (450–500 thousand), but the Jewish coordination is more coherent than the Arab, and the upper class of Arabs is closer to the right-wing movements, which makes them less interested in the Palestine issue. During the “pink tide,” the PLO invested in the prevailing political conditions there, however, the decline in its diplomatic activity, especially after the Oslo Accords, has weakened its Latin American activity despite the left-wing shifts. The Palestinian community in Chile is considered the most active one, especially after the second *Intifadah*, where a number of civil society organizations appeared, such as the Palestine Bethlehem 2000 Foundation (Fundación Palestina Belen 2000), the Palestinian Federation of Chile (Federación Palestina de Chile) and the Chile-Palestine Inter-Parliamentary Group (El Grupo Interparlamentario Chileno-Palestino). In 2016, over 600 Brazilian and Chilean intellectuals signed a letter calling for the academic boycott of Israel. This mobilization was led by various bodies, particularly in cooperation with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Surveys indicated that 56–64% of non-Arab Latin American students voted in favor of cutting institutional links with Israeli universities. A number of studies also indicate the need to focus Arab political activity on the role of Israeli private security companies in Latin American countries.<sup>31</sup>



## Conclusion

There are three political entities supporting Israel in Latin America: The Evangelists, right-wing Militarists, and the Jewish lobbies, and there are those who oppose it, comprising of leftist movements and cultural elites. The US role is huge in this region, however, Israeli trade, arms sales, support of right-wing movements and the employment of private security companies<sup>32</sup> are also important factors that enhance the Israeli influence there.



## Recommendations

The resistance movements should put a strategy for dealing with this area, on the following basis:

1. Building bridges with the left movements in Latin America, since they enjoy great popularity. Perhaps as the corruption charges of former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva have been annulled in March 2021, this would pave the way for his return to compete for the presidency in the upcoming Brazilian elections in 2022.<sup>33</sup> This necessitates mobilizing Arab Brazilians to support him in confronting the pro-Israel President Bolsonaro.



Luiz Inácio  
Lula da Silva

2. Support groups and Arab unions must be organized, particularly within the Arab-Latin American communities. By virtue of their long experience, they must be reached out to, and their guidance on how to deal with Latin American countries and societies must be sought.
3. Studies following up the Israeli political, economic and military activity in this region must increase, in order that the strategy for dealing with this region be built on scientific bases.



## Endnotes

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