



Brazil-Palestine-Israel Relations

This work received the 2021 Ricardo Boechat Best Article Award

Ahmad Alzoubi

MIDDLE EAST M●NITOR

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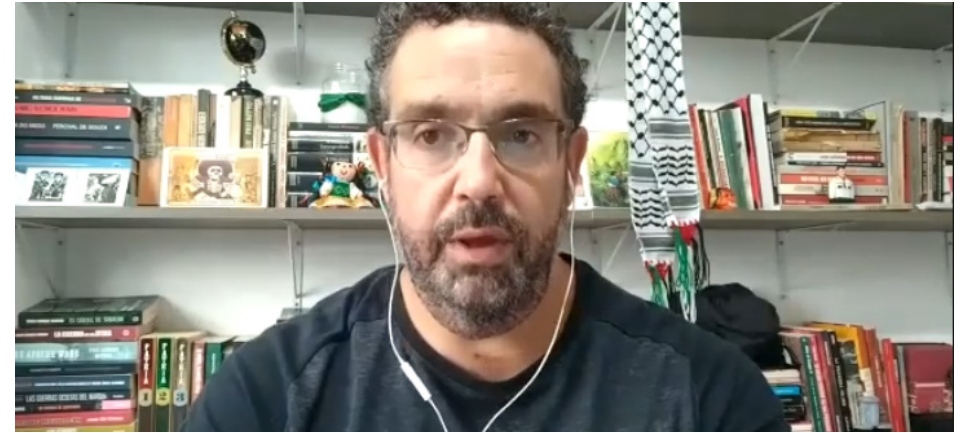
Latin America is one of the most supportive regions of the Palestinian cause. This was evident with the official recognition of the State of Palestine by most countries in the region, except for Mexico and Panama. Latin American governments proved their positions over the years by supporting United Nations (UN) resolutions favouring the Palestinian people and their legitimate rights.

The rise to power of popular-democratic coalitions contributed to such a degree of international solidarity. These alliances made efforts to reach some independence in terms of foreign policy beyond the US diktats, including the approach to their major Middle Eastern ally, the Zionist State of Israel.

According to Bruno Beaklini, MEMO researcher and columnist, there was a time when there was a significant propensity by some Global South countries to improve ties with the Arab World, including Brazil, in particular, and Latin America in general. Such South-South relationship efforts did not represent a complete breakdown with US-aligned policies, predominant since the creation of Israel.



Flags of Israel, Brazil and Palestine



Interview with MEMO collaborator Bruno Beaklini

However, the Latin American approach changed since Donald Trump's rise to power in Washington. The current Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, regards Trump as his ideal in foreign policy and follows his lead. "Brazil bought an entire US agenda for the first time", argued Beaklini, as Bolsonaro effectively tried to benefit from the Trump experience. Some Latin American countries, like Costa Rica,



Donald Trump and Latin America

Honduras, Guatemala and Paraguay, followed the Brazilian lead by threatening to move, or moving, their respective embassies from Tel Aviv to occupied Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Paraguay backtracked on its commitment and kept its mission address in Tel Aviv.

Brazil-Palestine relations

Since 1948, Brazil has adopted a neutral approach regarding the Palestinian issue by keeping some distance from the Zionist occupation and the indigenous demands. The exception was a brief period during the military dictatorship, when the president Ernesto Geisel recognised the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1975, allowing the appointment of a Palestinian delegate in Brazil — at that time, dividing offices with the Arab League mission in Rio de Janeiro. That same year, Brazil voted in favour of the UN General Assembly **Resolution 3379**, defining Zionism as a form of racism. This process was inherent to some Latin American progress benefiting Palestine from then on.

On the other hand, Israeli-Brazilian ties are sound and solid historically. Brazil voted in favour of the UN General Assembly **Resolution 181**, which recommended the partition of Palestine to create a Jewish state on Palestinian land. The occupation, since then, has tried to improve and deepen relations with Brazil and Latin America, betting on such rapprochement to enable some continental support for the colonisation.



Cartoon by Carlos Latuff, published on Twitter

After 2003, when **former union leader Luis Inácio Lula da Silva** (Lula) rose to power, the Brazilian approach concerning Palestine substantially changed, searching for a more active role in an eventual resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lula was the first Brazilian president to visit both the Zionist entity and the Occupied Palestinian Territories in 2010.

Palestinian-Brazilian journalist Soraya Misleh reasons that Lula's primary interest was to secure a Brazilian seat at the UN Security Council, presenting his administration as a conceivable broker and, simultaneously, a "friend" of Israel and Palestine.

During his mandate, Brazil assumed a public stance of support for Palestinian rights by voting in favour of the indigenous people at international forums — mainly the UN. In December 2010, Brazil recognised the State of Palestine within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Right after, Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority (PA), visited the Latin American country to partake in President Dilma Rousseff's inauguration.

Brazil encouraged neighbouring countries — then handled by popular coalitions, including Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador — to acknowledge the 1967 borders. The recognition wave in Latin America extended to 2013, when every regional state had formally accepted the State of Palestine, except for Mexico and Panama. Brazil also led efforts to sign a free trade agreement between the PA and the economic bloc Mercosur on 20 December, 2011. The deal comprised member-states like Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Venezuela; associated countries, like Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia and Chile; and observing members, namely Mexico and New Zealand. Despite being quite symbolic, due to the low degree of trade between Mercosur and Palestine, the arrangement provided the Palestinian side with

the same importance given to Israel, which already had signed such a deal. Mercosur contributed, therefore, to boosting the regional and international status of Palestine.

Brazil has supported Palestine politically and financially, including substantial assistance to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), donating up to \$8.5 million to humanitarian programmes between 2011 and 2013.

In 2014, the Brazilian diplomacy body decided to return its ambassador from Tel Aviv to Brasilia as an act of protest against the Israeli onslaught on the Gaza Strip. In response, Israel demeaned Brazil as a “diplomatic dwarf” and an “irrelevant country”. In the same year, Rousseff’s administration refused to give credentials to the Zionist ambassador in Brazil, Danny Danon, due to his address in an illegal settlement in the occupied West Bank. Relations were tense up to the impeachment campaign against the Brazilian leader, considered a potential catalyst to a new shift in Brazilian foreign policy, this time, more inclined to support Israel.

However, Misleh highlights:

“Despite their diplomatic pledges, Lula and Dilma maintained the realpolitik approach prevalent in Brazilian foreign policy. During their administrations, Brazil became the fifth more prominent importer of Israeli military technology. At the same time, Brazil opened its doors to gather Latin American missions and Zionist companies, intending to expand business with the neighbouring countries.”

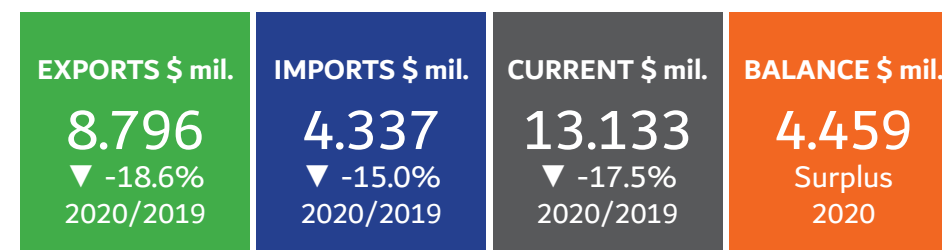
Brazil-Israel relations

Over the last few years, Brazil has become a more friendly state to the Israeli occupation. In January 2019, the then Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu travelled to Brazil to celebrate the inauguration of Bolsonaro. The year before, Bolsonaro’s campaign identified the then far-right candidate with Trump, defending the Israeli colonisation and rebutting the national rights of the Palestinian people.

According to Misleh, Bolsonaro soon became the explicit Zionist representative in the presidential chair, deepening trade agreements with Israel and tearing the realpolitik approach in the name of ideological affinities.

Meanwhile, the Arab market has kept a large share of Brazilian exports. In 2020, Brazil exported \$10.9 billion to Arab countries, with a trade surplus of \$5.6 billion, as confirmed to Reuters by General Hamilton Mourão, vice-president of Brazil. In March 2019, the backlash effectively forced Bolsonaro to give up moving the Brazilian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The step would jeopardise Brazilian exports, particularly sales of halal foods, as Brazil is the largest global exporter of halal meat to Arab and non-Arab countries, including Turkey and Iran.

Exports, imports & trade balance – partner: Middle East



4.21% EXPORT shares 2020 2.73% IMPORT shares 2020

Trade relations

In 2021, the juncture was even more favourable to the Brazilian trade ties with the Arab world and the broad Middle East, as affirmed by Ualid Rabah, head of the Arab-Palestinian Federation of Brazil (Fepal). According to official data mentioned by Rabah: “Up to September, Brazil had exported \$10.3 billion to the Arab countries as opposed to \$8.2 billion in 2020, an increase of \$2.1 billion. The trade balance with the Arab bloc is considerably beneficial to Brazil, with a \$3.5 billion surplus in the three first quarters of 2021.”

The same is true, reminded Rabah, for non-Arab countries in the Middle East, namely Turkey and Iran, exporting \$4 billion up to September, an increase of \$1.3 billion as opposed to 2020. The Brazilian surplus in these cases also grew during this period: from \$2.2 billion to \$2.7 billion.

Meanwhile, Brazil has a considerable trade deficit in its relations with Israel. Until September 2021, Brazil sold \$432 million to the Zionist state and bought \$817 million in Israeli goods. Therefore, the Brazilian shortfall was some \$384 million within the first nine months of 2021; analysts foresaw a potential deficit of half a billion dollars quite soon.

Exports, imports & trade balance – partner: Israel

EXPORTS \$ mil.	IMPORTS \$ mil.	CURRENT \$ mil.	BALANCE \$ mil.
428.9 ▲ +15.4% 2020/2019	1.024 ▼ -15.9% 2020/2019	1.452 ▼ -8.6% 2020/2019	-594.9 Deficit 2020
0.2% EXPORT shares 2020	53° EXPORT ranking 2020	0.6% IMPORT shares 2020	32° IMPORT ranking 2020

“I mean: How come Brazil has linked its foreign policy to an Israeli subordination, in substantial disadvantage, despite the Arab and Middle East ties with a total income of \$14.3 billion in nine months and a trade surplus of \$6.2 billion during the same period? It is likely a suicidal foreign policy”, argued Rabah.



Eduardo Bolsonaro, Brazilian MP and Jair Bolsonaro’s son, next to his brother, Senator Flavio Bolsonaro, in the Zionist club Hebraica in Rio de Janeiro [Twitter]

The trade exchange between Israel and Brazil represents roughly 40 per cent of Zionist trade with other Latin American states. As the largest country on the continent, Brazil is also the most engaged in business with the occupation. However, the export of Israeli goods to Brazil makes up 70 per cent of the total bilateral trade, which means the transactions are favourable to Tel Aviv at 30 per cent. In 2020, the balance with Israel was detrimental to Brazil by \$600 million; in 2019, even worse, with a deficit of \$833 million.



Eduardo Bolsonaro, Brazilian MP and Jair Bolsonaro's son, meets with an Israeli delegation about a non-approved Israeli drug to covid-19 [Twitter]

According to official data, the trade exchange between Israel and Brazil represented approximately \$1.5 billion in 2008, with 150 Israeli companies operating in Brazil, including 42 agricultural tech businesses, 42 communication firms, 24 security companies and 17 medical equipment industries. In 2013, the total amount of Israeli exports to Brazil reached \$1 billion. Furthermore, over 30,000 Brazilian tourists visit the State of Israel yearly.

Despite previous diplomatic endeavours to support the Palestinian political scenery, the trade relations between Brazil and Israel indeed collaborated more with the occupation. According to MEMO editor Rita Freire, this is an accurate statement, particularly in the military field.

The issue, indicated Freire, is that Brazil has become one of the largest worldwide consumers of Israeli weapons. Besides equipping the Brazilian army with Zionist articles and training, the Latin American country is also a significant client when supplying its military police. Such ties actively link the Brazilian security model to oppressive Israeli policies at the expense of the Palestinian people, over which these heavy weapons are tested and verified to trade.

Freire said:

“In 2015, when we engaged in a humanitarian mission to Palestine, within the scope of the World Social Forum, with Brazilian support, we realised the Elbit corporation — weapon and vigilance supplier — produced drones employed against Gaza in the previous year; at the time, Israel killed at least 163 Palestinian children. Therefore, Brazil has lived a contradiction: supporting Palestine at the UN but funding the Israeli military industry, which massacres the indigenous people and supports the occupation.”

Military trade is the primary target of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns. The grassroots movement urges Brazil to cease the acquisition of Israeli weaponry, vigilance equipment and oppressive training until the Palestinian liberation from the Zionist occupation. Some companies targeted by the BDS campaign are Afcon Holdings, Rafael Defense, Carmor, Contact International and many other suppliers of military goods.

Freire pointed out:

“There is also the agro-business, with the import of commodities, pesticides and irrigation tech to Brazilian crops, which is particularly painful considering the destruction of Palestinian lands and the water apartheid against the indigenous people all over the Jordan River banks — vastly reported by international observers.”

Despite the foreign policy of the current Brazilian government, the Palestinian people still hope that Latin American countries may oppose the role of occupation accomplices, as promoted by the US. They would rather expect active and material solidarity for Palestine in international forums and criminal courts and sever trade ties with illegal settlement companies.

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