



THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE AND ARGENTINA'S 'EQUIDISTANT' POLICY

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Ahmad Alzoubi

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THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE AND ARGENTINA'S 'EQUIDISTANT' POLICY

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His research focuses on ties between the Palestinian diaspora in Latin America and the media's role in preserving their culture and identity. His articles speak of the relationship between the Palestinian cause and Latin American countries and Brazil. He also writes about other subjects of the Arab world.

Although geographically distant, Argentina has a history of solidarity with Palestine. Before the approval of the UN Partition Plan for Palestine in 1947, the South American country was a contender as a possible location for a “national home for the Jews”. This idea appeared in Theodor Herzl’s *The Jewish State* published in 1896. Argentina was identified as one of the options for the Zionist project, along with Palestine, due to the fertility of its lands and its small population at that time.

According to the Zionist ideologue, Argentina was “one of the most fertile countries in the world, [that] extends over a vast area, has a sparse population, and a mild climate.”

Herzl believed that, “The Argentine Republic would derive considerable benefit from the cession of a portion of its territory to us.” He did, however, note that, “The present infiltration of Jews has certainly produced some discontent, and it would be necessary to clarify to the Republic the intrinsic difference of our new movement.”



¿CÓMO SE SENTIRÍA USTED?

#PalestinaLibre

And if it were Argentina? [Reproduction]

Fifty years later, Argentina was one of the few countries in the world to abstain from the vote on Resolution 181 through which the UN, under the leadership of Brazilian Oswaldo Aranha, agreed to partition the land, which led to the occupation of most of Palestine.

Despite this, the Argentine government has kept ties with the newly-founded State of Israel and Palestine, oscillating between criticism of and partnership with the occupation government. After a decision by Brazil to recognise the State of Palestine, Argentina did the same, supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders generally accepted to be the 1949 Armistice (“Green”) Line.

Arab immigrants

A large part of the Palestinian community in Argentina today is descended from a large wave of Arab immigrants who arrived in the late 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century, when the Middle East was under Ottoman rule.

The daughter of a family of immigrants from that period, Argentine psychologist Bea Esseddin, recalls that the Arabs who migrated during the Ottoman period considered themselves to be Arabs, because Lebanon, Syria and the other Arab states did not exist as independent entities.

The commonly-used term “Arab nation” is defined by its territorial, linguistic and cultural cohesion, while simultaneously celebrating its ethnic and religious diversity. Not only is diversity tolerated, but it is also a source of pride. Within Arab culture, differences are deemed to enrich everyone. This explains why at that time, “The Arabs had a worldview and a sense of nationality very different from those produced by the Arabs after the European occupation, which forced each Arab region to fight separately to found their independent states,” Esseddin recalled.

She explained the Arabs' efforts to establish social, cultural and educational institutions in different regions of Argentina as a way of uniting their communities, regardless of their geographic, ethnic or religious origins. They also established newspapers, some of which were bilingual in Arabic and Spanish.

Before the ongoing Nakba — the catastrophe of the violent expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and land in 1948 by Zionist militias supported by the UN and the creation of Israel on their land — there were a small number of Jews among the Arab immigrants in Argentina. They participated in Arab institutions alongside Christians and Muslims. This coexistence lasted until 1948, when the Jews distanced themselves from these institutions and founded others, dedicating themselves to spreading Zionist ideology and the Hebrew language.

Of the Arab families today, experts believe that many may not know if their ancestors were Palestinians as they were identified more broadly as "Syrians" when they arrived in Argentina.

The documents of those who migrated from the Ottoman Empire were issued by the Turks, and so in both Argentina and Brazil they were called "Turks". Even today, for many Argentines the terms Turks, Arabs and Muslims are synonymous. It was only in the 1980s that some descendants of these immigrants founded associations characterised distinctly as "Palestinian".

Argentina abstains

The Latin American continent was once the largest voting bloc in the UN General Assembly. This meant that Arabs and Zionists alike targeted and lobbied its member countries.

In 1947, when Argentine President Juan Peron met a diplomat from Lebanon, the latter requested the support of his government for the Arab position in the UN vote regarding Palestine. According to press records, Peron informed the diplomat that Argentina's position was already defined in solidarity with the Arab cause.

Argentines have for decades supported the Palestinian right to establish a state, and condemned the Israeli policy of land confiscation and occupation. In 1976, Carlos Ortiz de Rozas, the Argentine representative at the UN, criticised Israel's settlement policy and confirmed with his vote two resolutions recognising the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as an essential participant in efforts to reach a fair and lasting agreement in the region.

Many efforts were made by Arab immigrants, institutions and delegations for pro-Palestine positions to be adopted by Argentina. Some names of those involved should be remembered, among them a group that worked to prevent the Peron government voting in favour of the partition of Palestine at the UN: Peronist Elias Richa; the Palestinian director of the Arab Library in Argentina, Ibrahim Hallar; and the head of the Arab League delegation for Latin America that arrived in Argentina in 1947, Akram Zuaiter.

Zuaiter was one of the first Arabs to work in South America to develop diplomatic support and lobby groups. He established the Argentine-Arab Committee to defend the Palestinian cause after calling on other Arab groups in the country to coordinate their activism. The committee effectively managed to unite and mobilise Arab communities in Argentina. The so-called "Arab delegation" which visited Latin America in 1950 was led by Zuaiter. He and his colleagues went to Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Palestinian Hallar promoted the organisation and planning of visits by distinguished Arab personalities to Argentina with the aim of meeting with the state authorities. In 1947, he received Mahmoud Azmi Bey, the vice-president and most important member of the League of Arab States, whose visit aroused a lot of interest from the Argentine media.

Argentina's abstention in the UN Partition Plan vote was consistent with the aspirations of President Peron, who sought more freedom in decision-making and voting against the will of the United States as the Cold War started. He wanted Argentina to demonstrate its political independence and saw in the Arab world, especially after the end of French colonialism, an opportunity to open a relationship with the emerging independent countries. The Arab community in Argentina — particularly the Syrians and Lebanese, and even the small Palestinian community — played a positive role in Peron's adoption of this position.

The abstention was received by the Arab League and Arab communities as discreet alignment with the Palestinian cause. The Syrian-Lebanese Society of Santiago de Estero, the Syrian-Lebanese Club of San Juan, and the Arab-Muslim Society of the province of Cordoba, among other Arab civil society organisations in the country, sent notes thanking the government. The Arab newspaper Los Dones de Tucuman, a provincial Arab stronghold in Argentina, thanked the Peron government for supporting the Arab cause, as did the Central Arab Committee for Aid to Palestine.

Both Elias Richa and Ibrahim Hallar were present at a street event celebrating the abstention decision. Hallar congratulated the crowd and said that Argentina was the symbol of resistance against the unjustifiable concept of creating a Jewish national home in Palestine. An Argentine circular was headline news in October 1947, thanking Peron for his pro-Arab policy.

Academic Edward B Glick wrote about "Latin America and the Palestinian Problem" in 1958. He concluded that the vote on partition "could largely be explained by the influence of [the region's] Arab communities."



A protester holds a sign during a demonstration in front of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires on 15 May, 2018, after the killing of 60 Palestinians by Israeli gunfire during mass protests along the Gaza border as the US opened an embassy in occupied Jerusalem [Mabromata/AFP via Getty Images]

Rapprochement with the Arab world

The vote and neutrality of Argentina in the UN had a direct impact on its relations with the Arab world. There was a rapid increase in diplomatic activity. As researcher Ignacio Klich rightly states, despite the Middle East being outside the "normal orbit of interest" for Argentina, Peron's first two terms in office witnessed the expansion of ties between the regime and the region.

However, Peron sought to balance his support for Palestinian rights with measures that would not upset Israel, which were considered as setbacks by the Arabs. He appointed Pablo Mangel as the first Argentine Ambassador to Israel and was the first in Latin America to establish formal diplomatic relations with the new state.

In the following decades, Argentina established commercial agreements and had significant exchanges with Israel, including the acquisition of equipment during the 1982 Falklands War against the British. In return, Israel demanded that Argentina should exert any pressure by issuing condemnations of the occupation state in international forums.

“Furthermore, in the 1950s, Argentina was beginning to establish itself as a major supplier of beef and wheat to the Middle East, including Egypt, Jordan, Syria and, to a lesser extent, Palestine,” Klich pointed out. Although Israel was important to Argentina’s diplomatic interests, “Palestine became one of the most important markets in the Middle East,” added the researcher.

The Argentine government maintained a positive relationship with the Jewish community in the country for many years. However, this did not mean automatic support for the State of Israel. While Argentina sought to maintain its historic “equidistant” position between Israel and Palestine, it was occasionally critical of the occupation state when deemed necessary, as happened when Israel invaded Lebanon, for example, and during its brutal response to the First Palestinian Intifada (Uprising).

President Raul Alfonsin cancelled a visit to Tel Aviv in response to Israel’s repressive treatment of the Palestinian uprising. Nevertheless, according to political scientist Professor Ornella Fabani, Argentina’s position was generally to avoid critical resolutions against Israel.



“Juicio a las Juntas,” in Buenos Aires, 22 April 1985; as requested by then-president Raul Alfonsin and civil calls for justice, the military leaders in Argentina were held accountable for their crimes committed during the dictatorship [Telam/CC]

Even so, in his speech at the 40th UN General Assembly in 1985, the then Argentine Foreign Minister, Dante Caputo, expressed concern about the Palestinian issue. He supported the Palestinian right to an independent state and the rights of “all states in the region, including Israel, to live within secure and internationally recognised borders” and condemned violent occupation. “For these same reasons, we condemn all actions that threaten the existence of these rights, such as the occupation of territories by force, and acts of terrorism and violence that destroy lives, families, and mutilate children and young people.”

Development of the Arab community in Argentina

The Arab community in Argentina saw the flourishing of its institutions during the 1970s. Members of the community, especially those from Lebanese and Syrian backgrounds, are well integrated into Argentine society and operate with various levels of influence.

The Federation of Argentine-Arab Entities (FEARAB) brings together various provincial groups. It was created in 1972 and has generally maintained a friendly relationship with Argentine governments since then.

Ever since 1984, the Arab community has adopted soft power strategies. A group of Chilean exiles of Palestinian origin formed a theatre company that created a space for interaction between Argentines of Palestinian origin and served as a catalyst for bringing the community together and disseminating details of the situation of the Palestinian people across the country. The Argentine-Palestinian Cultural Centre, Sanaud, was also created that year, with the aim of promoting the history, culture and politics of Palestine. The Argentine-Palestinian Federation was created in 1987.

During the 1980s, the Argentine Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian People was formed, even before the existence of the Palestinian National Authority in the occupied homeland. The Information Office in Argentina was born in 1985 with the following objectives: "The defence of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people; the dissemination of the details of the Palestinian issue; the commemoration of key dates for our people; and, particularly, the defence of recognition by the Argentine government of a future diplomatic office of the Palestine Liberation Organisation."

The Arab community in Argentina has had important representatives in the country's politics, such as President Carlos Menem, and Juliana Awada, who was first lady during the government of President Mauricio Macri (2015-2019). In addition, the community has an influential presence in various fields, including journalism, with the well-known journalist Daniel Haddad; the owner of Radio Belgrano, Jorge Antonio; and many footballers and team coaches.



The Argentina team refuses to play ball with Israel [Carlos Latuff]

Government positions since partition

Juan Domingo Peron was President of Argentina three times: from 1946 to 1952, from 1952 to 1955 and from 1973 to 1974. For him, Argentina's rejection of the plan to move the capital of Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem did not favour the deepening of the relationship between the two countries. Argentina maintained its position despite Israel's appeals.

After the bloody period of the Argentine dictatorship (1976 to 1983), there was a close relationship between the Alfonsín government (1983 to 1989) and the community of Zionist Jews. There was implicit support for Israel during the next government, although fluctuating.

Carlos Saul Menem Akil was President of Argentina from 1989 to 1999. In 1990, he allowed the PLO to open its first office in Buenos Aires, but did not officially recognise the organisation. This only happened in 1996, with the recognition of the Palestinian National Authority by Argentina, after Israel and the PLO had recognised each other.

In 2005, a year after the death of Yasser Arafat, Argentine President-elect Nestor Kirchner authorised the opening of a diplomatic office in Palestine and, in 2006, signed agreements for agricultural cooperation and industrial development with Israel.

The country's position has changed more than once recently, leaning to the left during the government of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (2007-2015). During her time in office, Argentina was represented in Ramallah from 2008 and, at the end of 2010, recognised a free and independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders.

However, Argentina's foreign policy has generally been one of maintaining the equidistant principle. It has also dealt with the sentiments of the Jewish community following the 17 March, 1992, explosion at the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, which left twenty-nine dead and 242 injured. In 1994, a car bomb exploded at the headquarters of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) and the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) in downtown Buenos Aires. Official investigations did not point to any connections with the Palestinian-Arab community in Argentina, but the organisations felt the impact and suspicion.

When interviewed by Ornela Fabani, the former Secretary General of Fearab, Gustavo Moussad, stated: "The two attacks in Argentina, whether on the Embassy or the AMIA, were the worst disaster that the Arab and Islamic community could have suffered in the country; a blanket of permanent suspicion and persecution hung over us through the actions of the intelligence services and print and television media."

Argentina had its first visit by an Israeli prime minister under the government of Macri when, on 11 September, 2017, Benjamin Netanyahu went to Buenos Aires. The following year, however, the Argentine national football team announced that it would not play a friendly match with Israel, generating a lot of media comment.

The political transition from Macri to his successor, Alberto Fernandez, was a period of pressure from the Zionist lobby for governments around the world to follow the British example and accept the definition of anti-Semitism prepared by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), as the preferred definition of those who see political criticism of Israel as a form of anti-Semitism.

The definition was adopted by the legislature in Buenos Aires. Typically, media discussion did not really address the fact that the fight against anti-Jewish racism is entirely different to legitimate opposition to Israel's occupation of Palestinian land.

Media perceptions

Some people interviewed about how the Argentine media approaches the Palestinian issue suggested that there are key situations in which resistance to Israeli occupation appears on the agenda, and these are generally associated with violence and wars.

During the partition process, Arab communities in Argentina tried to promote an information campaign to promote the Palestinian cause. In 1976, when President Isabel Peron was ousted, freedom of the press was compromised by the censorship imposed by the military regime. Protestors and other dissidents were repressed with great brutality. During that period, there were many arms deals with Israel.

Democracy was restored in Argentina in 1983. Years later, when footage of Israeli military offensives against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip was shared on social media, Argentina joined other Latin American countries in condemning Israel.

The President of COPLAC (the Confederation of Palestinian Communities in Latin America and the Caribbean), Rafael Araya Masry, has described the presence of the Palestinian community in mainstream Argentine media as negligible; social media appears to be the only vehicle for the dissemination of Palestinian comments, news and opinion pieces when Israeli attacks are launched.

It is rare to see mainstream media coverage of this issue, except when the Israelis attack the Palestinians in Gaza. On such occasions, information is published, but it is almost always sourced from major international news agencies. There is, therefore, a lack of local sources in Argentina that address the Palestinian issue comprehensively and objectively.

Bea Esseddin agrees. For her, the coverage of the Argentine media on Palestine is limited to highlighting bloody incidents such as attacks on Gaza. Outside of these moments, Palestine is noticeable by its absence both in the media and in academic textbooks. When the subject is mentioned, it is usually done so according to the Zionist narrative, without consulting the Palestinian community or the Palestine Embassy in Buenos Aires.

Although a small number of Argentine journalists express support for the Palestinian cause, the coverage is sporadic and there is no regular media dedicated to the issue.

When events in occupied Palestine do make the headlines, the pro-Israel position is highlighted. The Palestinian viewpoint is missing, and the voice of Palestinian Argentines is rarely heard. The perception is that the Argentine media does not give equal coverage.

According to journalist and radio host Fernando Issas, it is a rare exception for Palestine to be part of the media agenda. He believes that journalists and popular communicators outside the establishment are the people who can break such censorship to talk about Palestinians and others struggling for freedom and self-determination.

Issas' programme is dedicated entirely to Palestine; *Detras de los Muros* ("Behind the Walls") provides a voice for the Palestinian diaspora in Argentina. He has no sponsors or advertisers to ensure, he said, that there are no conditions placed on what he can and cannot broadcast.

Issas believes that the positions of successive Argentine governments regarding Palestine are an important factor in whether the issue has more or less space in the media. The Palestinian community was heard more from 2003 to 2015, he said, when Cristina Kirchner and her late husband, Nestor, governed Argentina.

Masry agrees. He believes that perhaps the biggest media breakthrough on the Palestinian issue was achieved during Cristina Kirchner's government, which officially recognised Palestine as a free and independent state in 2010 and invited President Mahmoud Abbas to visit Argentina, granting him a state visit with all of the ceremonial that it entailed. The mainstream media, said Masry, had no choice but to cover the visit.

Moreover, every time Kirchner spoke for Argentina at the UN General Assembly, she used her speeches to remind the world of the right of Palestine to have its own state in accordance with international law.



Mahmoud Abbas (3rd from left) next to Argentine President Cristina Kirchner (3rd from right) during an official lunch at San Martin Palace in Buenos Aires on 23 November, 2009. Abbas was on a two-day official visit to Argentina [Juan Mabromata/AFP via Getty Images]

The reality is that many people in Argentina do not know what is happening in Palestine or do not know the reason for the conflict. That's the opinion of footballer Marcos Abdou, the grandson of immigrants who arrived in Argentina by sea after fleeing from war. He has represented Palestine in international matches. Based on his experience, he believes that news about Palestine appears when it involves more regular things, such as football. He cited the cancellation of Argentina's match against Israel in Tel Aviv after the Argentine players refused to participate in protest against the occupation.

The situation in Palestine is given media space, said Syrian-Argentine journalist Gustavo Abu Arab, when there are natural disasters or a health crisis like Covid-19. A shortage of vaccine in Palestine made the news in Argentina. The Palestinian issue, he pointed out, also arises in stories with an Islamic theme, albeit with sources that do not know much about it.

During Mauricio Macri's term in office, the Zionist influence in the media was more noticeable. Since then, Israeli diplomacy has pushed for continuity in the partnership between Buenos Aires and Tel Aviv.

Internal pressure from Arab and Jewish communities, and external diplomatic pressure, seem to have more of an impact on the Argentine perspective of the Palestine-Israel issue than deeper investigations into the occupation in daily media coverage. "There is no such thing as a better government regarding Palestine, only specific attitudes," commented Abu Arab.



President Mauricio Macri welcomes the Israeli prime-minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Buenos Aires, 12 September 2017 [Twitter]

President Alberto Fernandez surprised everyone by choosing Israel as the destination for his first foreign trip after taking office in January 2020. This attracted attention in the international media because, traditionally, the first foreign visit by a President of Argentina is made to Brazil. Does this mean a change of policy? Fernandez says no. And he maintains the country's opposition to moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.



Argentine President Alberto Fernandez and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met in Jerusalem on 24 January, 2019, and made a joint statement accompanied by their respective wives, Fabiola Yanez and Sara Netanyahu [Esteban Collazo/Wikimedia/CC]

It seems, therefore, that Argentina's traditional equidistant politics and diplomacy is here to stay, for the time being at least. Like his predecessors, Fernandez is probably well aware that to approach Palestine-Israel in any other way could have a major impact on relations with other countries in the Middle East.

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