



## ANALYSES

# Latin America and the Struggle for the Liberation of Palestine



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Latin American solidarity with the Palestinian struggle stems back to the region's own national liberation and decolonisation movements. [Reuters]

## Introduction

This paper spans decades of Palestinian and Arab presence in Latin America. It begins with the Nakba (1947-1951) and covers the First Intifada (1987-1992), which culminated with the Oslo Accords and the change in the correlation of forces within Palestine. The analysis is aligned with UNESCO's "Arab Latinos!" perspective, recognising the Arab diaspora in Latin America and a development plan for this political identity (2023-2027):

In line with the purpose of the roads of dialogue at UNESCO, "Arab Latinos!" will stimulate intercultural dialogue by uncovering the diversity of cultural expressions that informs the history of this circulatory space created by the interactions across the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea... The presence of the Arab diaspora can be observed in different fields of Latin American society, such as politics, art, science and business. Significant migratory flows from the Arab countries have arrived in Latin America since the end of the 19th century - mainly from Syria and Lebanon - followed by Palestinian refugees after 1948... [\(1\)](#)

The Arab diaspora in Latin America is the third largest migratory current. It is mainly based in Brazil, Argentina and Chile. Chile has the largest Palestinian community outside the Levant, with a concentration of Christian families from the East. In Brazil, the largest presence is of Lebanese Arabs,

mostly Maronite (more than 14 million people). In Argentina, however, they still identify as Syrian-Lebanese (which is a pre-Lebanese identity).

This paper has two sections. The first presents a mosaic of relations between the insurgent regional left and the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in its frontline context of pan-Arabism. The second addresses the largest Palestinian institutions. The influential role of Palestinians and Arabs in Latin America is not limited to commerce or positions of visibility as intellectuals serving a cause. It can also be noticed in medical sciences, the health field and legal careers.

In the diaspora, Arab Latin Americans have become 'socially white,' and many have even reached the highest levels of government, with some attaining the presidency. Carlos Saúl Menem (Argentina), Abdalá Bucaram and Jamil Mahuad (Ecuador), Nayib Bukele (El Salvador), Michel Temer (Brazil) and Mario Abdo Benítez (Paraguay) are examples within the field of conservatism or neoliberalism. Within the national and popular sector (left, center left and national liberation), there are several other examples.

## **1. The Palestinian struggle from the perspective of national liberation, decolonisation and anti-imperialism**

### **Arab Peronists and the heroes of the Argentine resistance**

In February 2021, shortly after the death of former president of Argentina Carlos Saúl Menem, I published an article in the Portuguese edition of Middle East Monitor (MEMO) calling him a “double traitor”. In the same article, I pointed out the other side of the collective, the historical involvement of Argentines of Arab descent, both with the national and popular sector and in supporting the Palestinian Cause. Below is a selected excerpt:

Envar 'Cacho' El Kadri (1941-1998) was a young pioneer of the Peronist resistance and, later, of the left wing of this political sector. A lawyer, journalist, filmmaker and guerrilla fighter, the son of a Lebanese father, he fought in rural and urban guerrilla situations. In exile, after the military dictatorship of March 1976, he had experience fighting alongside the Palestinian resistance in the first phase of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990).

Perón managed to gain the support of Argentine Arab leaders and associations. In 1948, out of 200 Justicialist deputies, 25 were of patrician origin. From September 1955 until the debacle of the insurgency against the gorilla and sellout dictatorship established in March 1976 (ended in December 1983), Arabs had a key role. Mirta Malena , a teacher, and Adriana Isabel, a doctor, were kidnapped and murdered by the military, becoming martyrs of the Montoneros Political-Military Organization. Their brother Ricardo René Haidar (1944-1982) participated in the Montonero counteroffensive until

he was kidnapped and disappeared in Brazil in 1982, with the repression still in effect through Operation Condor. [\(2\)](#)

## **The Palestinian struggle from the perspective of the Cold War and national liberation in Latin America**

As support for the Algerian War of National Liberation waned, the PLO became increasingly prominent in non-aligned movement forums and Arab world struggles, influencing their perspectives and priorities at the time. According to Tricontinental Magazine, in an article dated August 2029:

The Tricontinental Conference...was a gathering of radical national liberation and socialist forces from Vietnam to Chile...One of the main organisers of the conference – the Moroccan revolutionary Mehdi Ben Barka – said that the Tricontinental would bring together 'two currents of the world revolution : the current born with the October Revolution and the national liberation revolutions' current. [\(3\)](#)

In another text, we see the connections reinforced. In an article by renowned pro-Palestine activist Maren Mantovani, she revisits the PLO's trajectory towards Latin American insurgent politics:

The Palestinian people's entry to Latin America was largely due to support received from Cuba, in particular during the Tricontinental Conference held in January 1966 in Havana. The Palestinian people played an often forgotten role in the construction of this historic event , which brought together more than 500 representatives of eighty-two delegations...It was in fact in Gaza that the celebration of a tricontinental conference was agreed upon...[\(4\)](#)

Some testimonies from that time are important. According to Mantovani, PLO chairman Yasser Arafat declared in a 1969 visit to Cuba:

The alliance of the Arab and Palestinian national liberation movement with Vietnam, the revolutionary situation in Cuba and the People's Democratic Republic of Korea and the national liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America is the only path to create a camp that is capable of confronting and triumphing over the imperialist camp.

Later, in 1979, Sandinista spokesperson Jorge Manda stated in an interview: "There is a union of blood for a long time between the Palestinian revolution and us. Many of the units of the Sandinista movement have been in Palestinian revolutionary bases in Jordan . In early 1970s, Palestine and Nicaraguan blood was spilled together in Amman and elsewhere during the Black September battles." [\(5\)](#)

Cuba played a key role in shaping the PLO's relationship with Latin America during the height of the Cold War and the struggles for decolonization, particularly after its victorious social and national

revolution on 1 January 1959. In an article published by Al Jazeera, Dalia Hatuqa starts her article on the Cuban-Palestinian connection, describing a scene: “It’s November 1974, and Yasser Arafat, sporting his signature Ray-Ban sunglasses and checkered black-and-white headscarf, is waving to a cheering crowd on the tarmac of Jose Marti International Airport outside Havana.” Later, she explains, “...despite its close relationship with the PLO, Cuba continued to maintain relations with Israel until 1973. It was during the Non- Aligned Movement summit of that year in Algeria that Cuba announced it would break off relations with Tel Aviv.” [\(6\)](#)

### **Schafik Hándal, the American Palestinian Center and the Zionist connections**

Another example is the Salvadoran leader of Palestinian origin, former guerrilla fighter Schafik Jorge Handal (1930-2006). Handal was a highly influential member of parliament during the time when the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) was a legal political party. During El Salvador’s period of armed resistance and civil war (1979-1992), he was one of the five permanent commanders of the insurgent front.

Amy Fallas, a writer and historian specialising in Middle East history, narrates,

On March 24, 1981, Schafik Handal, the secretary general of El Salvador’s Communist Party and the international representative of the militant Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), delivered a press conference in Beirut...The event capped off a week-long diplomatic mission aimed at fostering closer relations with leftists in the region...As the son of Palestinian migrants, Handal also had a personal connection to his Middle Eastern comrades. [\(7\)](#)

Nonetheless, the case of Guatemala is exemplary. Zionist operations in Central America have increased the engagement between the region’s insurgencies and the PLO, and vice versa. Reactionary governments, loyal to the United States, act as clients of the Zionist state. Uruguayan journalist Raúl Zibechi conducted a survey exemplifying this type of correlation:

Under the dictatorship of General José Efraín Ríos Montt— responsible for the murder of 200,000 people, the disappearance of 45,000, and the razing of 500 villages —Israel was the main supplier of arms and the “number one friend of Guatemala in the world.” Beginning in 1977 until the signing of the peace accords in 1996, Israel provided Guatemala with 50,000 Galil rifles, one million rounds of ammunition, 15 Arava planes, five helicopters, and a thousand machine guns that were used during the height of the Mayan genocide, in agreement with the United States. [\(8\)](#)

## **2. The largest Palestinian institutions**

### **The Palestinian community in Chile and the professional football club, Deportivo Palestino**

Club Deportivo Palestino de Chile is the largest socio-sports institution of the Arab diaspora in Latin America. After becoming professional in the 1970s, following the unfortunate rise of the military, neoliberal, and pro-Western dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet on 11 September 1973, the club inspired similar initiatives across the continent. These include the Club Social y Deportivo Central Palestino Fútbol Club (in the department of Rocha, Uruguay, on the dry border with Chuí, the southernmost municipality in Brazil) and Palestino Fútbol Club de Honduras. Other notable representations of the Arab diaspora included Esporte Clube Sírio in Brazil, which became the FIBA basketball world champion in 1979, and its political and sports rival, Clube Atlético Monte Líbano, which was the FIBA basketball world runner-up in 1985. What sets Deportivo Palestino apart is its scope, almost becoming an instrument of presence and representation for the more than 600,000 Chileans of Palestinian descent. In fact, for a long time, the main sponsor of the professional men's adult football team was the Bank of Palestine.

International relations professor Julieta Espín Ocampo argues:

Although the vast majority now identify primarily as Chilean-Arabs, far from being diluted, the Palestinian identity is, to a certain extent, reinforced from within. The community's social organisation and activism, the interest of younger generations in rediscovering their own roots—despite the loss of the Arabic language and other identity elements—and, above all, the political activism toward Palestine, suggest the permanence of the ties that unite the members of this community, as well as their interest in the historical future of the country of their ancestors. [\(9\)](#)

### **FEPAL and the Brazilian model**

In Brazil, there is an increasingly noticeable phenomenon that also interests the broader diaspora across the continent. The Palestinian community in Brazil is the smallest among the various Arab communities in terms of the number of Brazilian citizens. It is much smaller than the Syrian community and even more so than the large population of Lebanese descendants, estimated at 8 to 10 million people. Additionally, the Palestinian community does not form a majority in any of the main religious groups, such as Eastern Christians, Sunnis or Shiites. Nonetheless, the Palestinian community's influence and leadership extend far beyond that of all other Arab groups combined, including more recent factions. This includes groups that openly support Hamas and criticise the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its current leadership under Mahmoud Abbas, which is seen as ineffective.

The Arab Palestinian Federation of Brazil (FEPAL) is the leading organisation representing the Palestinian diaspora in Brazil. On its official website, FEPAL presents its history with careful attention to crafting a coherent narrative. Under the leadership of lawyer, businessman and journalist Ualid

Rabah, the organisation has solidified its national presence, establishing a dominant influence across alternative media, particularly on the left and in opposition to Zionist narratives.

FEPAL describes itself as follows:

“Founded in 1979, the Arab Palestinian Federation of Brazil – FEPAL is the entity that represents the Palestinian diaspora in Brazil, comprising at least 200,000 immigrants, refugees, and their descendants. Affiliated with the Palestinian Confederation of Latin America and the Caribbean (COPLAC) and recognizing the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, it works to defend the interests of communities of Palestinian origin living in Brazil, advocating for them in political and social spheres.” [\(10\)](#)

## **COPLAC**

FEPAL is part of a broader continental network under the Palestinian Confederation of Latin America and the Caribbean (COPLAC). Founded in 1984, COPLAC represents Palestinian communities and their descendants across Latin America and the Caribbean. It is officially affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

COPLAC's historical leadership has included figures from across the region, notably a Chilean based in Argentina and a Brazilian of Arab descent. The organisation's current president, Rafael Araya Masry, comes from Chile's leftist political tradition. Having survived the era of military dictatorships in South America as a young man, he later became a key figure in fostering ties between the PLO and Palestinian diaspora communities.

The Secretary-General of COPLAC, Emir Mourad, also has an impressive career. A veteran representative of secular forces and Palestinian diplomacy in Latin America, he is notably more active on social media than the organisation's president. This dynamic reflects a division of labour: while the president focuses on expanding Palestine's official diplomatic reach, Mourad plays a more public-facing role.

Although COPLAC operates independently, it maintains undeniable ties to the PA, given that the PA appoints official Palestinian diplomatic representatives in the region. Many of these figures are veteran fedayeen with distinguished careers, reinforcing the historical and political legitimacy of Palestinian advocacy in Latin America.

In their paper, “Arab migration and integration in the Southern Cone in the first half of the 20th century: the Chilean case”, historians Azun Candina Polomer and Ricardo Marzuca Butto examine the increasing institutionalisation of Arab communities in Latin America, focusing on Chile as a case study to illustrate their growing presence in formal power structures:

...the emergence and development of organisations such as FEARAB [Federation of Arab Entities] and COPLAC in the 1970s and 1980s deserve particular study. These are only briefly mentioned here, yet their relevance continues to this day. We believe they are of particular interest because they correspond to a period of economic consolidation, full integration, and maturity of the communities...

[\(11\)](#)

The various forms of representation described in the aforementioned paper can be observed in all Latin American countries with an Arab presence, including Palestinian communities, particularly Central America and Chile.

### **Conclusion: Peddlers, doctors and the imaginary Palestine**

If there is a social hero in the Arab diaspora, including the Palestinian community, it is the traveling salesman, or peddler. On Instagram, FEARAB Brazil posted, “Did you know that the origin of the word mascate refers to the profession of traveling salesman, which was very common among Arab immigrants, particularly those of Syrian and Lebanese origin, who came to Brazil between the late 19th and early 20th centuries?”

Here, the presence of the Palestinian struggle in Latin America was in its founding phase, when the PLO and its political-military forces, which were mostly secular and republican, emerged after al nahda (the Arab renaissance). The period of greatest activity for this movement in the diaspora occurred between 1918 and 1948, coinciding with the nakba (the catastrophe), when the creation of Israel led to the mass displacement of Palestinians.

The direct correlation is also evident in the influence of the Arab world on our continent. Events such as the Syrian War of Independence, the rise of Arab nationalism in Egypt, which spread throughout the Arab World, and the heroic Algerian War of Independence marked the formation and political imagination of the descendants.

There are arguably three key ideals that guide the Palestinian community: the pursuit of social status through education (evidenced by the high number of professionals and academics in various fields), achieving prosperity (a tradition stemming from the earlier generations of peddlers, with Palestinians in the 1950s and 1960s contributing to this legacy), and maintaining strong loyalty to Palestine.

However, as discussed in another article published by MEMO, oftentimes, external factors like political power, social position and racial identity play a larger role in influencing one’s political stance. As a result, “almost always, the position in the Brazilian social pyramid and the fact that we are ‘white’ influence more than loyalty to the struggle for the liberation of Palestine.” [\(13\)](#)



In this context, the “imaginary” Palestine represents an idealised vision of the homeland that provides dignity and identity to individuals of Arab origin, particularly those in the middle or upper class who occupy socially privileged positions. This vision of Palestine serves as a symbol for those who have access to power and resources in the periphery of the West. For Palestinian immigrants, success in the diaspora often aligns with active engagement in the community, while for others, true solidarity with the struggle for Palestine's liberation may require an unwavering commitment to its cause.

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