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From Syria to São Paulo

The Role of Middle East Immigrants in Brazil's International Relations

By Monique Sochaczewski

Official diplomatic discourse plays an important role in forging a national *ésprit des corps* among bureaucrats and consolidating an international image of the country. A dominant theme of Brazilian diplomatic discourse is the legacy of "ten peaceful borders that allowed a century of uninterrupted peace," achieved by José Maria da Silva Paranhos Júnior, the Barão do Rio Branco, as foreign minister in the period from 1902 to 1912. The Barão—or Baron— is an iconic figure; one of the main avenues of Rio de Janeiro and the prestigious school that trains Brazilian diplomats in Brasília are named after him, and his image is emblazoned on Brazilian currency. Other recurring themes include universalism and national dignity. And in recent years, the "Brazilian tradition" of coexistence has taken on increasing importance.

The notion that Brazil's Arab and Jewish communities are fully integrated into society, and enjoy harmonious relations, has been commonplace in Brazilian official discourse for decades. Today, the coexistence narrative helps drive and justify a more active Brazilian foreign policy regarding the issues of the Middle East. But it is reasonable to question how much of the narrative is a myth, and in turn, whether it is a valid basis for pursuing a robust Brazilian foreign policy in the region.

Passage to the Americas

Arab and Jewish communities are in fact integrated into Brazilian society today. However, it is important to note that integration was not easy for either of them, particularly in the beginning. Empirical evidence contrasts with the idealized tale that Arab immigrants easily adapted to every corner of the country.

Middle Eastern immigrants began trickling into Brazil as early as the 1850s, and Arab descendants mark 1885 as the official beginning of their

◁ Members of Arab and Jewish communities share a meal at a Lebanese restaurant, Rio de Janeiro, July 26, 2006. *Sergio Moraes/Reuters/Corbis*

immigration from Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria. The 1890s witnessed the first large-scale arrival. The Rio newspaper *Gazeta de Notícias* reported that crowds of "strange tanned and bearded men" attracted much "admiration and distrust" on the part of Brazilians. Those first immigrants largely became peddlers, initially selling objects brought from the Holy Land, such as amulets, rosaries, and small religious images. They later began to sell matches, clothes, and haberdashery in remote places that did not have established trade, such as in the suburbs and regions far from urban centers. Arab peddlers spread throughout the country.

About 4.5 million immigrants entered Brazil between 1872 and 1949. Approximately 400,000 of these were Asians, Arabs, and Jews. Europeans, who made up the majority of the immigrants, were welcomed and could rely on large private or public programs to help them settle. The Brazilian government and the elites believed that Europeans were the "ideal immigrants," able to work as farmers, settlers, and craftsmen; and they also assisted in "whitening" society after centuries of African slavery. Asians, Arabs, and Jews on the other hand, were considered by the government and elites as non-white or "imperfect white" and, with the exception of the Japanese arrivals in 1908, could not rely on official immigration programs at all.

The Arabs were Ottoman subjects leaving an empire that did not officially allow their departure, as they were needed for cultivating the land and serving in the army. The Sublime Porte also feared the poor image that some immigrants projected of the Ottoman Empire—as they begged on the streets of European cities such as Marseille and Genoa to afford passage to the Americas. The Brazilian government showed little interest in encouraging immigrants who had no intention of working in agriculture and were not seen as white and Western.

Arab immigrants and their descendants hold up the Arab peddler as an important symbolic figure who represented modernization in the country. They emphasize the "civilizing role" of Arab immigrants who overcame difficulties and dangers to bring the products of modernity and progress to the most remote ends of Brazil. They portray the Arab immigrants as pathfinders and pioneers in integrating national territory in the fashion of the São Paulo *bandeirantes* two centuries earlier.

Brazilian newspapers from the turn of the twentieth century, however, record another story. It is not difficult to find in these now-digitalized sources regular reports of hostilities, extortion, robberies, and even murders against small immigrant groups or solitary peddlers in communities throughout Brazil.

There were several incidents involving immigrants in small cities such as Tubarão, Patrocínio de Muriaé, Ponte Nova, Diamantino, and Campinas, especially in the 1890s. In 1898 a significant incident took place in Cachoeiro do Itapemirim, in the state of Espírito Santo. Arab shopkeepers were forced by locals to abandon the city

and their goods were plundered. The case helped prompt the Sublime Porte to designate Othon Leonardos Filho as the Ottoman consul in Rio de Janeiro to deal with the growing number of crimes committed against Ottoman subjects in Brazil.

Over time, these immigrants and their descendants began to project varying identities. Some 85 percent of the Arabs in all the waves of immigration to Brazil were predominantly Christian; they included Roman Catholics, Maronites, Antiochene Orthodox, Melkites, and Protestants. As the anthropologist Paulo Pinto points out, some immigrants focused on ethnic issues, using the generic term "Arab" or the term "Syrian-Lebanese" common in Brazil. Others gave more importance to their places of origin, such as Beirut, Zahle, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Homs, Aleppo, or Damascus. There was still an emphasis on "national" origin, including by Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians. Among the Muslim immigrants, membership in one of the various sects, such as Sunni, Shiite, Druze, and Alawite, also shaped their self-designation. Jews immigrating from the Middle East could have an Arab or Sephardic identity, as well as a deep connection to their hometowns, such as Sidon, Safed, Beirut, Istanbul, or Smyrna.

Saara Story

Until the 1940s, a relatively close relationship existed among Arab Christians, Arab Muslims, and Arab Jews in Brazil. In a series of popular essays on the religions of Rio de Janeiro published in 1904, the Brazilian writer João do Rio noted that the Arab Jews of the city center were more integrated with the rest of the Arab immigrants than with the Ashkenazi Jews of European background, who also had begun to settle in what was then capital of the country. The historian Rachel Mizrahi, in her 2003 book *Jewish Immigrants of the Middle East: São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro*, highlights that the area of Rio where Arab Muslim, Christian and Jewish families lived was called Little Turkey—a reference to the Ottoman Arab territories—and that it was a space of "respect and cordiality." There are some published memoirs and photographs that evoke the rounds of hookah and backgammon games that united the Arabs of different religions in downtown Rio in the first decades of the twentieth century. Something quite similar happened in São Paulo's Mooca district.

A shopkeeper named Henrique Nigri, son of a Jewish immigrant from Lebanon, wrote a book in 2012 called *Saara Story* (after Rio's Arab quarter), and reported that by the 1930s the direct and regular contact of the immigrants with Lebanon and Syria had diminished, although the food, music, and Arabic language were maintained by all "as a souvenir." Nigri says that the only difference in marriages of Arab Jews, Christians, and Muslim Arabs at that time was who officiated: a rabbi, a priest, or an imam. The language, the music, the food, and dancing were basically the same.

Sometimes Arabs and Jews even enjoyed commercial relationships, especially in the business districts around Rua da Alfândega in Rio and Rua 25 de Março in São Paulo.

The dynamic significantly changed during the 1940s, particularly due to the establishment of the State of Israel amid the 1948 Palestine war, and the conflicting views that the Arab and Jewish communities held about it. Arab leaders in the region as well as religious officials of the Christian churches of the East, issued statements opposing the partition of Palestine and calling for Arabs around the world to help to prevent it. Brazilian newspapers published editorials, and reported on the impact that Israel's War of Independence (*Al Nakba*, the Catastrophe, to the Arabs) was having particularly on Lebanon, with the flood of refugees into the country. A note signed by members of Brazil's Arab community published in *Estado de São Paulo* newspaper in 1948 declared that "500,000 Arabs and their descendants [in Brazil] and more than seventy million Arabs worldwide" called on the Brazilian government to refuse recognition to the State of Israel.

Other factors, including fallout from the Palestine war, also played a part in cooling communal relations. For example, in 1943, Lebanon secured independence from France, and Syria did the same in 1946. These new states soon established formal relations with the Brazilian government and sought to establish closer ties with their countrymen in Brazil. Public diplomacy from Arab countries increased during the 1950s to "clarify" events in the Middle East for the Arab Brazilian community. Meanwhile, the Arab community itself created institutions that reshaped its relations with the Middle East, such as the Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, established in 1952 with the aim of strengthening economic ties between Brazil and Arab countries.

Within Brazil's Jewish community, Rabbi Isaiah Raffalovich had attempted as early as the 1920s to bring together Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Arab Jews in a Jewish Brazilian community. His efforts were not altogether successful, but a sense of unity gained momentum in the 1940s. First, there was the need to deal with the presence in Brazil of Holocaust survivors and, later, refugees from Arab countries. The foundation of the Israelite Federation of São Paulo in 1946, the Israelite Federation of Rio de Janeiro in 1947, and the Confederation of Brazilian Israelite Societies in 1948 are examples of the search for unity. The establishment of Jewish recreation clubs in the 1950s also gathered together Jews in São Paulo and Rio.

Meanwhile, the 1948 war, and subsequent conflicts including the Suez Crisis in 1956, the Six-Day War in 1967, and the Lebanese Civil War from 1975 to 1990 spurred the arrival of new immigrants, increasingly Muslims, from the region. These waves affected relations between Arabs and Jews as well as among the Arabs themselves. The Arabs spread all over Brazil, but Jews and Christians concentrated in Rio and São Paulo, and Sunni Muslims in Rio, São Paulo, Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul and

Distrito Federal. Shiite Muslims, increasing in numbers since the 1980s, concentrated in Curitiba and Foz do Iguaçu, in southern Brazil. All the groups in general were quite careful to strengthen their connection and loyalty with Brazil, trying not to draw attention to their positions towards the politics of the Middle East. But the communities manifested divergences of views on Israeli policy in general and the Palestinian issue in particular, internal politics in Lebanon and its relations with Syria, the Iran-Iraq War between 1980-88, and about Islam.

Uses of Diplomacy

Brazil's involvement in the diplomatic maneuvering around the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947 marked an important phase in the country's policy toward the Middle East, perhaps representing its first proactive effort. During the earlier period of immigration, relations with the region were quite restricted and perfunctory, and largely related to the treatment of immigrants and consular issues including the handling of property left by deceased immigrants lacking heirs on Brazilian soil.

Then a Brazilian played a starring role during the partition debate, Oswaldo Aranha, who was head of Brazil's UN delegation and president of the UN General Assembly in 1947. Aranha acted firmly in favor of the final position to divide Palestine into separate states for Jews and Arabs—a role that led Israeli cities to name squares and streets in his honor. According to diplomatic papers, Aranha's posture had mainly to do with advice from his foreign ministry—in case of deadlock Brazil should follow the United States—than with a special Brazilian policy formulation for the Middle East. The official Brazilian vote was cast, however, by the delegate of Brazil in the General Assembly, Arthur Souza Costa. In his speech, he said that Brazil supported "a plan that would preserve the political unity in Palestine" through a process offering the "largest number of alternatives." No mention was made in the text to any "example" of coexistence.

It is interesting to note that just when relations between Arabs and Jews in Brazil were growing cold, the Brazilian government began giving more diplomatic attention to the Middle East. Beginning in the 1950s, references to the "harmonious relations" between Arabs and Jews in Brazil became increasingly commonplace in official discourse. Diplomats and public figures in speeches, public statements, or interviews highlighted the Brazilian position of "equidistance" towards the region as expressed in the praise or criticism offered to Israelis and Arabs. The region became increasing important due to the oil and potential business opportunities, but the Brazilian interest was more theoretical than practical.

Whether during the years of Brazil's dictatorship or during the democratic period, whatever the ruling party, there was, and still is, a discourse of "harmonious relations."

Between the years 1960 and 1980, it formed part of a broader discourse describing Brazil as a "racial democracy." The Brazilian representative in the UN Security Council in 1967 said that "both Arabs and Jews played an important role in the history of Brazil, not only contributed to our social and economic development, but also helped shape the cultural and spiritual aspects of the Brazilian civilization." In the last two decades, the discourse has focused primarily on "ethnic peace" between Arabs and Jews. Praising and willing to participate in the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians in the early 1990s, the then Foreign Minister Luiz Felipe Lampreia said: "The harmonic coexistence of Arabs and Jews in our country adds weight to our external discourse and gives substance to Brazilian diplomacy."

The Fernando Henrique Cardoso government (1995–2003), which Lampreia served, began an interesting inflation in the number of Arab descendants in Brazil. During this period, the government said that between six and ten million Brazilians of Syrian and Lebanese origin lived in Brazil. During the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2011) and Dilma Rousseff (since 2011) governments, the official figure has risen to 12 million. It is not possible to check those official numbers, however, and they seem more like a Brazilian argument to support its "old" and friendly connection to the region. The Middle East conflict that most affected the Lebanese and Lebanese descendants directly was the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. There were some cases of deaths of Brazilians in Lebanon and hundreds were helped by the foreign ministry to return to Brazil. Letters sent by Jews and Arabs to newspapers such as *Jorno do Brasil* passionately spoke of "Israel's right to self-defence" or the "the Zionist invader".

In this vein, both the government (to strengthen links with the Middle East as its peaceful tradition), and Arabs and Jews themselves (to strengthen their contribution to Brazil), promoted spaces such as the Saara in Rio and Rua 25 de Março in São Paulo as symbolic locations of coexistence, where Arab and Jewish shopkeepers fought merely a "war for a better price." Good relations, however, were less evident in politics. Events in the Middle East or related events in Brazil generated some degree of tension between the groups especially from the 1970s. A notable example is the violence that erupted in 1980 when the Palestine Liberation Organization—at the time regarded by the Israeli government as a terrorist organization—was permitted to install a representative in Brazil. Another tense situation involved the return to Brazil of Lamia Maruf, a Brazilian woman accused by Israel of participating in the murder of a soldier in the 1980s; she had been jailed for many years and released in the context of the peace process.

In 1960, the honorary consul of Jordan in São Paulo, Tuffik Mattar, publicly talked about creating a movement among descendants of Arabs and Jews in Brazil with the aim of attenuating tension in the Middle East. Similar thinking was evident in July

2012 when then Foreign Minister Antonio Patriota organized a seminar in Brasília called "From Side to Side: In the Construction of Peace in the Middle East, a Role for the Diaspora." Patriota said that he was inspired by Brazilian "diplomatic tradition" and by the book by Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf, *Le Dérèglement du Monde: Quand nos Civilisations s'Epuisent*. The minister hoped to engage Brazilian Jews and Arabs in a dialogue about peace in the Middle East. For instance, Maalouf argued in his book that there are cases of peaceful coexistence outside the Middle East and that immigrants could play an important role in uniting their countries of origin. Patriota wanted to convince the Brazilian Jewish and Arab communities to influence their counterparts overseas, suggesting that their relatively peaceful relationship in Brazil could serve as a model. The initiative received little attention from the press and appears to be dormant.

Many respected Brazilian analysts have highlighted the innovative proposals presented by Brazil to deal with the Middle East in the last decade. They noted that new actors in a profoundly intractable environment could bring new dynamics to negotiations. The Brazilian government under the Workers' Party sensed a window of opportunity to act more assertively in the region. Brazil's diplomacy appears to remain more of an ambition or a potential at this point, however. One reason is that traditional players such as the United States, although certainly weakened, still play an important role in the region. Another reason may be that Brazilian activism needs some improvement. A more mature and less wishful thinking understanding of Brazil's Middle East immigrants should be part of that.