

Arab and Jewish Diasporas in Latin America: part of the problem or part of the solution?

The following proposal aims at providing a new focus for the forthcoming meeting of the Palestinian Rights Committee in Latin America. In addition to the normal participation of diplomats from the entire continent, a sensitive and systematic preparation may result in the active engagement of important elements of both Arab and Jewish communities in the region, as well as Palestinian and Israeli experts on the subject. The recommendation of the final document may result in tangible deliverables, such as the formation of 'cousins clubs', joint Arab and Jewish investors coming to the Holy Land, encouragement of joint sports (football) activities, joint appeals for a just peace and prevention of human rights violations and more.

In many cases, Diasporas have maintained a sustained concern about the situation in their countries of origin, particularly at times of violent disputes. There have been several studies attempting to explain such phenomena often including the case of Jewish and Arab communities. The latter includes both Christians and Muslims, and the second has been increasingly immigrating to Western countries, becoming a numeric factor as well as a more organized group. Jews have been established in European countries for centuries and the word Diaspora was in fact related to such dispersion throughout the world. It has been often the case that leaving outside their homeland can result both into assimilation or radicalization, often becoming less pragmatic and more extreme in their demands than those peoples directly experiencing the violent conflict.

Both Arabs and Jews converged in significant numbers in their emigration to Latin America mostly from early XXth century. The region has also experienced a growing threat and actual use of violence related to the Israeli/Arab conflict. This late development has paradoxically occurred in a region where relations between their respective Diasporas have been cordial, often involved in similar business and professional activities. In a period when the level of ideological and political armed struggle has decreased throughout most of the subcontinent, we witness the salience of this ethnopolitical polarization. Hence, instead of "exporting" their good previous experience of coexistence to the fractured Middle East, Diasporas are now perceived as "importing" this conflict to Latin America.

The first generations of Palestinian emigrants established deep rooted ties with the host countries, mixed extensively with other immigrant or native groups and spread throughout its territory. The new arrivals are pointing out to a generation of refugees having being thrown out of the land. In the Zionist vision, their identity as living in “exile” from the land of the ancestors increased enormously with the creation of Israel in 1948. The centrality of this state has been further emphasized by the large number of wars that took place since its establishment (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, 1991, 2006, and 2008). The repercussion of the conflict between the Jewish state on the one hand, and Arab countries and Palestinians in particular, expressed itself in a growing number of attacks against civilians. The original clash of two nations claiming rights over the Holy Land became over the years a violent conflict driven primarily by religious extremist groups in both societies. Often justified in terms of Israel as an outpost of the West, it has been widely regarded as a clash of civilizations exponentially illustrated by the massive terrorist act of September 11, 2001.

The forthcoming Montevideo meeting can make a meaningful contribution towards empowering Jewish and Arab Diaspora throughout the continent to play a more constructive role in the pursuit of a just and lasting Palestinian/Israeli peace, and can present a program for implementation that will multiply the effect of this gathering over the years to come.