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Latin America and the Middle East: Contrasting Approaches

LSE Ideas

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Judging from recent weeks, the Middle East's engagement with the wider world seems to be directed by North-South relations. Washington's proposal for sanctions against Iran's nuclear programme came to a grinding halt in the UN while US vice-president Joe Biden was embarrassed during his visit to Israel by the announcement by Benyamin Netanyahu government to go ahead with further settlement building in east Jerusalem. Meanwhile Gaza has been on the receiving end of visits from the EU foreign minister, Catherine Ashton, and UN secretary general Ban Ki-Moon on either side of a Quartet meeting in Moscow over how best to restart the peace process.

Less considered is the nature of the South's relationship with the Middle East. This has been brought into focus with President Lula of Brazil's visit to Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories and Jordan last week and will be followed later in the year with a visit to Tehran. Lula's visit came after [trips from both the Israeli and Iranian presidents to South America](#) at the end of last year who both competed for support for their respective positions.

However, the extent to which Latin America can offer anything other than token support is demonstrated by the limited nature of the political and economic tools at its disposal. A comparison of the two countries in the region with the greatest extra-regional projection, Venezuela and Brazil, demonstrates this clearly. Undermining their capacity to influence events in the Middle East are both structure and agency issues, respectively the lack of sufficient integration between the two regions and the relative position of its leaderships in relation on the main issues of the day respectively. That said, the different approaches taken by Venezuela and Brazil show the divergence of action that is possible in the continent and the nature of South-South relations and diplomacy.

The Israel-Palestine conflict

Israel's position has deteriorated in Latin America since its foundation in 1948. At the time it received support from across the political spectrum. However, that goodwill was shattered in the eyes of the Left by its close association with the US after 1967 and its involvement in the training, assistance and supply of arms to right-wing governments in Chile, Colombia, Guatemala and El Salvador. While its involvement tarnished it with the left-wing politicians that have come to power in the region over the past decade, it has also become an increasingly peripheral concern to Latin American elites: [according to Carlos Escudé](#) of the Universidad del CEMA in Buenos Aires changes in the region's societies and the increasingly marginal role of Jewish communities and their leaders. Meanwhile, [Palestinian support has grown](#). The first and second Arab-South American summit declarations in 2005 and 2009 highlight the cross-regional support for a return to the 1967 lines, the dismantlement of settlements in east Jerusalem, the removal of the separation wall and support for the Arab peace initiative and the road map.

Of the two main Latin American powers, Venezuela has been the most overtly political. Hugo Chávez's government recalled its ambassador in the wake of the Israel-Lebanon conflict in 2006 and – along with Bolivia – broken diplomatic relations with Israel following the Gaza conflict in 2008-09. This put them in the same camp as Cuba, which has not recognized Israel since 1973. In contrast Brazil appears to have adopted a more soft-footed approach and emphasizing the economic dimension. However, even here the scope for South America's largest economy to influence the conflict remains limited on two counts. One, the prospect for an economic boycott of Israel is arguably weaker following a recent free trade agreement between it and Mercosur. Two, Israeli economic integration with Brazil is very limited. Although Israel's exports to Brazil hit a high of \$1.2bn in 2008, this was only a fraction of its estimated \$54bn total that year.

Iran's nuclear programme

In contrast to the Israel-Palestine conflict Latin American positions in relation to Iran's nuclear programme are arguably more equivocal. On one hand the Arab-South American summit declarations stress the goal of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East – an aim that is as much directed against Israel, the only nuclear power in the region, as it is against Iran. On the other hand, the two main powers in South America, Brazil and Venezuela, have endorsed the notion of a 'peaceful' nuclear

programme for Iran. This is reflected in the position of both over the past few years. Of the two, Venezuela is arguably the closer to Iran politically. In 2006 the Chávez government voted against referring the Iranian nuclear programme to the UN Security Council. More recently the two governments have collaborated in the search for uranium deposits in Venezuela to run their respective nuclear programmes. By contrast Brazil has sought more distance. It limited itself to abstaining in the November 2009 International Atomic Energy Agency vote while rejecting Washington's proposal for sanctions last month. At the same time [Lula has sought to link the Israel-Palestine conflict with Iran's nuclear programme](#).

The more ambiguous position of these countries – and the region more generally in relation to Iran – may arguably reflect some of the shared historical legacy. Whereas Israel has courted US support since 1967, today's Latin American and Iranian leaderships have adopted a more sceptical – even confrontational – stance towards Washington. Latin American and Iranian democracy have both been undermined by US intervention, including its support for coups, including the removal of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran in 1953 and João Goulart in Brazil in 1964 and the attempted removal of Chávez in 2002. In addition, Washington was committed to the repressive regimes which followed those successful coups.

Notwithstanding their shared experience, it is not apparent that either Brazil or Venezuela has achieved much in relation to confirming Iran's nuclear programme as peaceful – or indeed discouraging Tehran from the use of confrontational discourse in relation to it. Politically, Chávez is arguably less able to act as a mediator in this regard, given his own antagonistic nature. And while Lula seeks greater conciliation, the means for soft power influence – through economic pressure – remains similarly limited: the volume of trade between Brazil and Iran remains small, at around \$1.5bn and comprising mainly Brazilian exports. This compares to Iran's total imports of \$67.25bn and \$57.16bn in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

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