

Brazil and the recognition of the Palestinian state: more than words?

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“Considering that the demand presented by his Excellency [Abbas] is just and consistent with the principles upheld by Brazil with regard to the Palestinian issue, Brazil, through this letter, recognizes a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders”. With these words, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio ‘Lula’ da Silva skillfully played what will probably be his final card in a long series of carefully orchestrated foreign policy moves, aimed at asserting Brazil’s place in the world.

Indeed, just when everyone thought him busy handing over the reigns of the South American emerging power to President-elect and personal protégé, Dilma Rousseff, Lula made sure to end his second and final term with another ostentatious foreign policy decision. Officially, it came as a response to a letter sent by President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas his Brazilian counterpart at the end of November, specifically requesting such recognition. Unofficially, it sought to further position Brazil as an unavoidable actor in the current international order, with a mandatory say in the inherent multiple and complex crises.

In a different context, this would have been another ineffectual chapter in the long history of international under-achievements associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, in light of the current stalemate surrounding the US-reignited peace talks, a unilateral declaration of independence and the pursuit of full international recognition – through the UN General

Assembly, given the expected constraints within the Security Council – is being consistently floated around various world capitals, as a possible Palestinian way-out.¹

In that sense, and if Abbas’ letter is any indication of similar ones sent to several other Heads of State – thus signaling a growing resolve to proceed with the above mentioned option –, then this supposedly widespread campaign geared at gathering support can only be classified as rather alarming to the viability of any present or future negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. Argentina’s own recognition and Uruguay’s intention of doing so in early 2011 – both announced just a few days later after Brazil – only add further substance to this argument.²

However, Brazil’s acquiescence to Abbas’ request was not instigated solely by short-term Palestinian objectives. As much as Brazilian foreign policy touts the need for a comprehensive and mutually-agreed peaceful solution for this conflict – like any other emerging or developed country, for that matter – it is ultimately and constantly required to keep the country’s own national interests in mind when exercising its influence around the world.

Probably better than any other international newcomer with global aspirations, Brazil understands that in order

¹ See Jerome Segal, “Declare a Palestinian State” (*New York Times*, 23 February 2010).

² “Argentina joins Brazil in recognition of Palestinian state” (*Haaretz*, 6 December 2010).



to achieve a much coveted seat at the table, it has to actively engage in puzzling issues that persistently grab the world's focus but constantly elude any kind of resolution. Such a definition could very well apply to the Middle East scenario and all its deadly variables.

Therefore, it did not exactly come as a surprise when Lula and Foreign Minister Celso Amorim grasped this reality and recognized it as a staging ground where Brazil could employ its growing assertiveness and present a new and fresh approach as a reliable partner – considerably neutral between both warring sides – and then reap any eventual successes as proof of Brazilian diplomacy's cunning and expertise.

This is not to say that Brazil's motives in entering this heavyweight dispute were totally self-centered, based solely on the selfish logic of establishing credible international credentials and mediating existing quarrels. In the midst of all the rhetoric that Brazil seeks only to ascertain its foreign projection and expand its dealings with shady partners, it is important to keep in mind the country's deep and long-lasting commitment to the promotion and defense of core international values. Still, that is not impeditive of a pragmatic view on foreign relations and nowhere is pragmatism more evident than in Brazil's take on the Middle East. Lula's ventures in the region in March 2010 supposedly herald the dawn of a new phase of engagement with local tensions but resulted in much more international public exposure for Brazilian diplomacy than any actual developments on the ground. In this case, Lula's goodwill and confidence in presenting Brazil's willingness to mediate failed to convince both parties of its merits. Furthermore, it did not provide an enduring Brazilian follow-up interest in this matter. However, those were never truly the main goals, as stated before. And although it was not successful in tackling the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum, Brazil went on to throw its weight behind an ill-fated effort aimed at reducing suspicions over Iran's nuclear program – with equally questionable results³ – which would prove to be, yet again, another very public international platform for Brazil's vocal foreign policy.

Be as it may, the underlined line of thought exhibited by this latest episode is in perfect synchrony with the larger picture of Brazil's evolving foreign policy. If we take the "quest for autonomy" proposals to heart, Brazil would then be currently seeking to accomplish "autonomy through diversification", vying to "increase the country's international bargaining capacity in the relations with

more powerful countries".⁴ Indeed, by taking a stand on the world's most pressing and challenging crises, Brazil is primarily seeking to amass enough diplomatic influence so that it can be later used as leverage in the pursuit of its immediate foreign agenda.

However, the fact is, Brazil does not appear too concerned with any kind of backlash that might arise from its endeavors, or at least, it does not seem to consider this factor too seriously. For a nation who long waited for its moment in the world, the desired reforms of the international order are only bound to produce some friction between new and old players and in that sense, for Brazilian political class, it is only natural that public disagreements with certain Western policies and views come to grow exponentially.

In this case, reactions of displeasure were already expected to surface, given the political controversy surrounding this issue. For example, take US Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen – expected to become the Republican chairperson of the influential House Foreign Affairs Committee – whose remarks included classifying Brazil's announcement as "regretful" and only helping to "undermine peace and security in the Middle East".⁵ "A collective state of misjudgment has swept across Latin American" one could read in an editorial from the *Jerusalem Post*.⁶ Or even Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister, Daniel Ayalon, who branded Brazil and Argentina as "distant" countries that "don't realize the diplomatic mistake they made".⁷

Two problems arise together with these and many other official repercussions. First, in such polarizing crises, there is always the risk of potentially damaging previous ties and relationships and, worst of all, spoiling any existing leverage. Sure, the Brazilian *communiqué* included a reference to how "relations with Israel have never been as strong"⁸ – another token of the *Itamaraty's* pragmatism, some could say. But the truth is that, as of this moment, Brazil can no longer profess full impartiality in the matter. Claiming that support for unilateral actions is perfectly compatible with further bilateral negotiations – stalled or dead as they may be – cannot elude the fact that Brazil has forfeited its alleged neutrality and any possibility of ever equitably mediating this conflict.

Again, the validity of such an offer was always questioned and wrapped up in the country's diplomatic agenda.

3 See Pedro Seabra, "Brazil and Iran: Praises and disbelief" (*IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin*, No. 7, May 2010): 1-2.

4 Tullo Vigevani and Gabriel Cepaluni, *Brazilian Foreign Policy in Changing Times: The Quest for Autonomy from Sarney to Lula* (Lexington Books, 2009): 7.

5 "US lawmakers blast Brazil's Palestinian move" (AFP, 3 December 2010).

6 "Unilateral escapism" (*Jerusalem Post*, 8 December 2010).

7 "Israel upset by Argentina Palestinian recognition" (AP, 7 December 2010).

8 In fact, since April 2010, Mercosur holds a Free Trade Agreement with Israel, the first ever extra-regional country to sign such a covenant with the organization. Likewise, negotiations aiming at a similar goal are currently underway with Syria.



But it leads to a second predicament that precisely lies with what to expect of Brazil in the future. When an emerging power with legitimate aspirations to greater preponderance in the international order begins to squander its hard-won influence on multiple seemingly divisive feuds, questions arise regarding the country's chosen focus for its foreign approach. Indeed, there will inevitably come a time when Brazil will have to make harsh choices on matters of global security and stability, choices that for the most part Brazil has skillfully circumvented by partnering and aligning with fellow emerging countries in semi-concerted positions.⁹ This relatively ambiguous policy no doubt serves Brazil well in its present goals, since it provides a sense of detachment from the world's elite, thus enabling occasional opposing views, rather popular among developing countries. But in a near future, this strategy will almost certainly reveal itself to be insufficient to consolidate Brazil's foreign gains. Furthermore, Brazil's eagerness to present its stand in most pressing international affairs may end up being counterproductive to the coherency and cohesion of its own foreign policy, if such actions are not previously carefully planned and devised.

Still, as any sovereign nation, Brazil is naturally entitled to take a stand in matters that are of national concern, be they close to home or in another continent. However, it should also be aware of the political price that usually comes with such decisions and that it could end up affecting the country's long-term goals in several unexpected ways.

Ultimately, recognizing the Palestinian state might have provided Lula with some last, ephemeral, diplomatic momentum while leaving President-elect Dilma

Rousseff's image unscathed. Despite being supposedly shielded from the fallout from her mentor's decision, given her political affinities she was most certainly consulted throughout this process and therefore probably subscribed to such a move. But for the time being, Brazil's recognition, although significant, will remain relative in the larger context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as it will not create any real change on the ground. It will most surely add to a growing wave of support behind Palestinian claims, but at the end of the day it is unlikely that Brazilian diplomacy will feel any serious repercussions – even with Israeli complaints – or, for that matter, reap any serious benefits in terms of increased influence in the Middle East.

⁹ For example, Brazil's recognition of the Palestinian state is in line with similar previous moves by the other countries of the BRIC and IBSA forums.

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