

The Perception of the Palestinian Question in Latin America

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INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this brief paper is to sketch the history of the perception of the Palestinian Question in Latin America. To do so, I shall primarily focus on the discussions which have taken place and are taking place in the mass media and in open forums such as political meetings and congresses, as well as on the public statements and programmes of political parties, social, cultural and human rights organizations. This, I believe, is the best way to detect the changes in the collective consciousness of a people regarding the way in which a certain issue is perceived.

Actually, if one takes into account the frequency with which it is discussed, one will have to conclude that, in the last few years, Latin America's interest in the Palestinian Question has grown considerably, up to the point of being one of the few issues invariably included in most conversations and studies about global affairs. As we shall see later, this fact does not in itself indicate that a particular point of view is becoming prevalent, nor does it mean that the Palestinian Question has the same meaning or significance for all those who think and talk about it; rather, it simply indicates that many sectors of Latin American society are beginning to become aware that the resolution of that seemingly remote conflict, and the ways in which it is handled by the Great Powers could, immediately or in the near future, affect their own interests. This conviction, as far as I can see,

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is not, for the most part, the result of general considerations concerning the present state of the world, nor is it the consequence of the propagandistic efforts and the systematic press campaigns of the parties directly involved in the affairs of the Middle East. Certainly, such campaigns have taken place and they have had some effect. But the launching of these campaigns are the effect, rather than the consequence of the growing interest of Latin Americans in the problems of the Middle East, generated as the result of certain experiences which show them that their future and that of the other peoples of the Third World are linked together in more than one way. The characterization of these experiences, and the explanation of how the Palestinian Question became a matter of special concern to many Latin Americans are the topics of this paper.

1. *Latin America and the Arabs: Old and New*

From a purely quantitative point of view, it is hard to see why the future of the Palestinians should concern any one but themselves and, perhaps, the other Arabs. After all, the Palestinians are only about four million (less than the population of any major Latin American city), who have lived for centuries under one kind or another of foreign rule. In the particular case of Latin America, to this quantitative fact one has had, until recently, to add one not less brutal, namely, that most of the inhabitants of this continent were simply not aware of the existence of the Palestinian people — in spite of the fact that many Palestinians have been living in these parts for several generations. But, for a very long time, the real identity of the Palestinian immigrants to Latin America remained blurred or hidden by a legal and historical accident: that they arrived carrying Turkish passports, and for this reason, they became everywhere known as “the Turks.”

This was indeed a rather cruel joke to endure, particularly in view of the fact that the first Palestinian immigrants came to America precisely in order to escape the hardships of Turkish domination and the persecutions and discrimination of which they were victims because of their religion. A similar fate awaited the Lebanese and Syrian immigrants who arrived at about the same time as the Palestinians.

Regrettably, not many accounts, if any, have been written concerning Arab migration to America. Only recently, indeed, has the “Turk” started to appear as a familiar figure of city life in the literature of some countries, mainly Brazil and Colombia. What little is known of these first periods, that is, the first two decades of this century, is part of the oral traditions still preserved by the families and descendants of the original immigrants.

To some extent, though, this obscurity is due to the almost absolute lack of interest shown by the immigrants themselves in reminding people of their

origin. Most directed their efforts towards assimilating themselves to their "new countries," as evidenced by the fact that the vast majority of their children and grandchildren are unable to speak, or even to understand, Arabic. I would venture to suggest that, if most Arab immigrants did not altogether sever their ties with their "old countries," this was simply because of the special nature and structure of family ties in the Middle East. The ties they preserved with their homelands were not "national" ties, nor were they even "cultural"; they were merely family, and in some cases property, ties.

I would not mention these well-known facts if I did not consider them crucial to understanding the unusually small efforts undertaken initially by the Palestinian communities in America to explain the fate of their "old country" to their fellow citizens.

But there is another element to be considered in this context which has already been hinted at above: the religious factor. A vast majority of first generation immigrants were Christians who had come to America to escape Ottoman intolerance. This intolerance which, seen from the perspective of Muslim history, was a freak phenomenon, nonetheless left a deep mark on many Christian Arabs which has only recently started to be erased with the help of time, education, and, above all, the example of peaceful coexistence and tolerance which the sons and daughters of Palestinians living in America can now witness among the Palestinians living in the Middle East. At any rate, their resentment and their lack of education prevented the first immigrants from attempting any systematic effort to spread the interest in Arab culture and traditions among their new countrymen. This is not to say, of course, that there were not very valuable efforts by individuals both to help the immigrants preserve their mother tongue and their traditions, and to generate a concern among the local population for matters concerning the Arab world. But such attempts were isolated and often met with very little support from the immigrant communities.

Thus, these communities were extremely ill-prepared to respond effectively and aggressively to the impressive propaganda campaign launched by the Zionist movement before the meeting of the UN General Assembly during which the partition of Palestine was decided. At that time, official Arab presence in Latin America in the form of embassies or other types of diplomatic missions was almost nil, and, as far as can be determined, no serious efforts were undertaken by Arab representatives at the UN to stop the Latin American governments from casting their votes in favour of the resolution.

Moreover, the task of the Zionist agents who collected Latin American votes at the time was facilitated by the way both the issue of the creation of a Jewish state and the role of the Arab world were generally perceived by the educated strata of the continent. Two factors were mainly at work: an

ancestral disdain for anything "Arabic" or "Moorish," which had persisted mostly among the oligarchies and the old ruling classes, and the genuine sympathy for the European Jewish community which many progressive elements of the intelligentsia had developed as the result of the terrible experience which the members of that community suffered under Nazism. To the extent that the Zionists were able to present themselves as the sole representatives of the Jews, they had an easy task to perform in trying to sell the idea that the establishment of a Zionist entity would be the best and safest way of preventing a repetition of something akin to the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis.

The few politicians and intellectuals who, at the time, could have detected the deception, were finally confused by the support that the idea of partition received both from some progressive governments and from some of the main European intellectuals who served as their spiritual mentors. Concerning the Palestinian Question, as concerning many other questions of international politics not directly or obviously relating to their immediate realm, Latin American politicians have often tended to adopt, almost uncritically, the positions defended and advocated by the European and North American groups which they consider to be their natural counterparts. Even at the time of the Algerian War of Liberation, individuals who in many other respects professed views generally regarded as "progressive," showed themselves very reluctant to support the Algerians and to condemn the policies of the French government.

However, it is not possible to explain this paradoxical behaviour exclusively on the basis of the traditional tutelage that Western opinions have exercised on the minds of many Latin Americans. These attitudes have deeper roots that have to do with the ignorance of, and disdain for, things Arab mentioned above.

In sharp contrast with Spain, there are in Latin America very few universities and other institutions of higher learning where the Arabic language, history and culture are regularly taught as academic disciplines. Without the slightest trace of exaggeration, one can say that, until very recently, the knowledge that most Latin Americans had of the Arab world was very poor indeed, and not exempt from prejudice. To the extent that people thought seriously of the Arab world, they thought of its past splendours or miseries, while utterly ignoring the present ones. The Arab world was conceived as a huge wasteland, both in the symbolic and in the real geographical sense, and hence, it was assumed that nothing could be gained or expected from it. Moreover, the average Latin-American felt that there existed an insurmountable cultural gap between his own "Western" world-view and that of the Muslims, which made any real communication impossible. Thus, sympathies tended to lean towards the Europeans and

towards those who seemed closer to them.

After the establishment of the Zionist entity, these impressions were reinforced by the writings, speeches and statements of many influential authors and politicians such as Borges, Victor Raul Haya de la Torre, and many others, who produced veritable apologias of Zionism, presenting it as a messenger of civilization in the lands of barbarity, and as one of the most outstanding examples of the materialization of democratic ideals.

It is, then, against this background that the slowness with which the Palestinian cause is gaining support and understanding in Latin America has to be judged.

2. *The Palestinian Problem and the Media*

Two elements have traditionally conspired to make the daily press in Latin America deficient in its reporting of Third World affairs: lack of interest on the part of the editors, and lack of resources. The first lack has to do with the kinds of things described above, and it corresponds to a sort of oversimplified Hegelian conviction that history takes place in one area of the globe at a time. The second lack has made the Latin American press almost completely dependent on North American and European news agencies. Most daily newspapers simply reprint the cables provided by the international agencies without even bothering to add or subtract anything from them. A few take the time to do some rewriting in order to meet their own requirements regarding style. The occasional columnists who write on Third World affairs derive most of their information from the items received by their newspapers so that they, in fact, limit themselves to colouring the accounts they get, at the most, changing the emphasis here and there.

This dependence has been particularly strong and damaging regarding information about the Palestinian Question. The agencies which regularly feed the international pages of the newspapers are: United Press International (UPI), American Press (AP), Reuters and France Press (AFP). EFE, the Spanish service, and the Italian ANSA, as well as International Press Service (IPS), are used less frequently. Now, as is well-known, the first three agencies just mentioned have very defined sympathies for the Zionist point of view, and routinely distort every piece of information coming out of the Middle East in order to fit the demands of Zionist propaganda.

In referring in this context to the "press," I should point out that I mainly mean what is known as the "big press," that is, the most important daily publications in terms of their circulation. For the most part, such publications follow political lines generally identifiable as "rightist" or "centrist," but there are some that, in regard to most issues, except the Palestinian Question and a few others, defend opinions that could be labelled

“progressive.” Among the small press, including dissident and leftist publications, one can find a wider use of news items provided by IPS, EFE, and even the Cuban agency Prensa Latina, which are, as a rule, more objective in their reporting from the Middle East and, in some cases, sympathetic towards Palestinian theses.

In general, it has to be acknowledged that, regarding the manipulation of the press in their favour, Zionist representatives and agents in Latin America were very effective, at least until a few years ago. It can safely be affirmed that they enjoyed a virtual monopoly on the information regarding the Middle East which filtered down to the public for two decades, from the end of World War II up to the beginning of the last decade. This they achieved partly through control of the news agencies, but also with the help of more direct means.

As it did in other parts of the world, Zionist propaganda projected an image of “Israel” which, if ambiguous in its details, was at the same time sufficiently coloured to prove attractive to many different sectors of Latin American society. To the conservatives, “Israel” appeared as the stronghold of democracy and as the forefront of Western civilization in the Middle East; to the more progressive elements, “Israel” appeared as the land of the “kibbutzim,” and as a working experiment in socialism. Palestine, it was said, had been transformed from the desert it had been when it was in the hands of the “Bedouins,” into a garden. Of course, nothing was said about the fate of the “Bedouins” who had been living in Palestine before Paradise was established there.

The general Zionist strategy rested on a threefold manipulation: the manipulation of facts, men and language. Concerning the first element, and apart from disseminating illusions, half-truths and fantasies, the Zionists aimed at insuring a unilateral flow of information concerning all Middle Eastern affairs. In practical terms, this meant preventing the Arab, and particularly, the Palestinian point of view from being known. Not more than six months ago a respected Peruvian television journalist lost his job as a result of Zionist pressure exercised through commercial interests and active support from Israeli diplomats, because he had cared to air an interview with Yasser Arafat. But such bluntness is only resorted to in cases of emergency. Usually, the Zionists are much more subtle and simply try to play with some of the elements described in the first part of this paper.

For instance, as a rule, the fear of being accused of anti-Semitism was, and to some extent still is, enough to scare off many persons willing to give serious consideration to Palestinian claims. Moreover, the image of the Arab world as an area inhabited by fanatical and backward peoples, which is carefully and systematically cultivated, creates a natural reluctance among sensitive people in general, and journalists in particular, to defend the

Palestinians and the other Arabs, lest they appear as defenders of reaction and primitivism.

The second weapon of Zionist propaganda, the manipulation of men, has also been a very effective one. The most brutal practice in this respect has been the one of hiring well-placed journalists to write, or at least to sign, pro-Zionist and anti-Palestinian statements. In some cases, usually when the anti-Palestinian diatribes are too vulgar, they are printed as if they were news items transmitted by some international agency, the name of which is simply invented.

But men, good and honest men, are also manipulated in other ways, mainly by making sure that they are unable to see the world as it really is. Thus, apart from resorting to the usual methods of bestowing incessant honours, invitations and praise upon people, the Zionists try by all means to obscure their view. Consequently, the Palestinian freedom-fighters and combatants are customarily referred to as "terrorists" and "armed bandits," while the Zionist armed elements are described as "soldiers" and "forces of order." Perhaps the most important success of Zionist propaganda is the fact that, throughout Latin America, most discussions concerning terrorism eventually lead to a discussion of the methods of the Palestinian resistance. As a result, when the dislodged "Bedouin" is finally rediscovered, he has the ugly face of the terrorist.

This Zionist stratagem has been particularly successful in those countries which have experienced, or are presently undergoing, some sort of violent political and social confrontation. In such cases, the Zionists make a concerted effort to link the Palestinian resistance to the local groups really or allegedly responsible for the violent actions against the established governments.

During the last few years, nonetheless, the Zionist propaganda apparatus has been finding it increasingly difficult to maintain its monopolistic control over the international pages of the newspapers. This is partly due to some of the political developments that will be discussed later, but also to the effect on the "big press" of Latin America of some of the efforts made by the North American and the European press, which circulate and are normally read in the continent, to present more accurate pictures of events in the Middle East. When even American magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, and European ones such as the *Economist* or *Der Spiegel* attempt to appear "objective" concerning the Palestinian Question, Latin American editors who want to preserve the image of seriousness which their publications enjoy feel compelled to follow the example. But, as previously remarked, this is a very recent development, which, moreover, is limited to those countries where there is a minimum of political freedom, and where the governments have not, as is the case in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and others,

adopted an open position against the PLO and the Palestinian cause.

There is another encouraging recent development regarding objective reporting on the Palestinian Question in Latin America, to wit, the birth of a series of specialized and aggressive publications. There are now at least two serious magazines, both published in Mexico, which inform regularly and accurately on Middle Eastern affairs, namely, *MOI* (Medio Oriente Informa), edited by Gloria López Morales, and *Cuadernos del Tercer Mundo*, the Spanish version of which is edited by Neiva Moreira and Gerónimo Cardozo. *MOI* is exclusively devoted to Middle Eastern affairs, while Moreira's publication is concerned, as its name indicates, with Third World matters in general. Nevertheless, both constitute rich and reliable sources of information for a public otherwise deprived of the possibility of getting to know both sides of the story regarding the plight of the Palestinian people. To these publications one has to add the Spanish edition of the monthly newspaper, *Le Monde diplomatique* which deals regularly with Middle Eastern developments and in a factual and objective manner uncommon for Latin America.

Increasingly important are the more specialized periodicals which, although few in number and restricted in circulation, are beginning to have a certain impact on small circles of the intelligentsia. Also important are the numerous newspapers, magazines and periodicals published by the different groups and parties of the left which deal sympathetically with the Palestinian Question and other Arab causes.

The situation in the other media is basically the same as the one just described with regard to written journalism. As far as television is concerned, and apart from a few exceptions in the form of "specials" or isolated, and usually semi-clandestine, projections of Palestinian films and documentaries, one can safely say that access to it is still effectively blocked for any opinion openly favourable to the Palestinians. Regarding radio, the conditions are somewhat better. For a long time now, there have been special radio programmes in many Latin American capitals and smaller cities entirely devoted to things Arab. Most of these programmes are administered by persons of Arab descent, and are primarily conceived for and oriented towards the immigrant communities. Normally, they broadcast music and add short commentaries on the latest developments in the Arab world. In the last few years, some of these programmes have included daily news sections and, in a couple of cases at least, they have become quite militant in their defence of the Palestinian cause.

3. *The Changing Attitudes of Governments and Political Organizations.*

If I had to draw a line of demarcation between the time during which the

Palestinian issue was practically ignored by most sections of Latin American society, and the time when some important sections, including the progressive and more independent-minded political organizations, started to pay heed to it, I would choose the year 1974. For, although the tripartite aggression of 1956 against Nasser's Egypt, and the Algerian War of Independence aroused some interest and were topics of discussion, these events never became major issues and, except for some isolated instances, most groups and organizations did not consider it necessary to issue formal statements either supporting or condemning the different parties involved in those confrontations. Even the 1967 War did not turn the attention of most people towards the Middle East, and certainly, thanks to Zionist propaganda, it did not have the effect of arousing sympathy and support for the Arab people in general, nor for the Palestinians in particular, of whose plight and participation in the war most were still not aware.

It was only in 1974, as a consequence of Yasser Arafat's now famous visit to the UN, that the Palestinian people and their resistance movement started to be taken seriously in Latin America. Since then, the Palestinian struggle has been one of the inevitable topics of debate in political circles. Perhaps, Arafat's visit would not have had that effect had it not come after the crucial oil embargo and the 1973 War. Arafat's speech before the General Assembly, which was widely discussed, allowed many to realize for the first time not only the real magnitude of the interests at stake in the Middle East, but also the real political dimension and the nature of the Palestinian struggle, which now began to be perceived as the central question in the whole affair.

But there was another element also, namely, that the reception given to Arafat helped many to overcome the myth created by Zionist propaganda according to which the PLO was a terrorist organization.

The second important step in the process which started in 1974 was also due to an event which took place at the UN: the declaration which equated Zionism with racism. This declaration allowed many in Latin America to take the step forward they had been reluctant to take because of their fear of being accused of practicing anti-Semitism.

One also has to remember that between the final years of the sixties and the first years of the following decade, several reform-minded and progressive governments had come to power both in the Southern Cone and in the Andean Region. Many of these governments joined those of Cuba and Mexico, which had already been actively participating in the Non-aligned Movement. One cannot exaggerate the importance, in terms of the diplomatic history of Latin America, of the incorporation of some of the countries of the area into the Non-aligned Movement. This meant that for the first time the Latin American republics were attempting to redefine the traditional parameters of their foreign policy which, until then, had been

almost fully oriented toward the US and Europe. In the framework of non-alignment the Arab countries started to appear as more likely partners, and the community of interests as well as the potentials for horizontal cooperation were slowly perceived. Furthermore, the massive support which the Palestinian struggle enjoyed among Third World countries eventually led some of the governments of the region to reconsider their traditional stands on the issue.

It is in this context that the impact of two other events on Latin American diplomatic behaviour have to be measured: I have in mind the launching of Brazil's African initiative, and the Cuban participation in the wars of liberation of the former Portuguese colonies. The concomitant expansion of Brazil's industrial output and its energy needs led the government of that nation to develop a strategy of *rapprochement* with Western Africa, and eventually with the Arab countries. The full impact of these initiatives is still to be felt, but already they have contributed a new dimension to Latin American diplomacy.

More important perhaps than the Brazilian initiative, however, due to its immediate effects, was the successful performance of the Cuban troops in Africa, which demonstrated that effective military cooperation between Third World countries was indeed feasible.

In recent years, and this time in relation to events taking place in this hemisphere, the reality of this possibility has found further exemplification.

After the 1967 War, the Latin American military developed a certain interest in Israeli military equipment. The Zionist entity, on the other hand, had a vital interest in finding new markets for its weapons, and was quite prepared to sell them to the Latin American governments. But, as a matter of fact, these markets did not completely open until, one after the other, the progressive governments of the continent were replaced by right-wing military dictatorships. When Carter came to power in the US and launched his "human rights" campaign, which resulted in the imposition of some restrictions on the supply of weapons to the military dictatorships of the continent, the Zionist entity saw a great opportunity to become one of the main arms suppliers to this area. This time the Zionists found no obstacles since, apart from the common interests regarding weapons, they had many ideological similarities and, above all, many phobias in common with the rightist dictatorships.

Among such dictatorships was the one of Somoza in Nicaragua. The Somoza regime benefited greatly from Zionist support, particularly during the last months of the civil war. This fact was widely known in Latin America which, for once, was almost unanimous in its repudiation of Somoza. Moreover, after the victory of the "Sandinistas," another piece of news erupted which was to have an enormous effect on the way Latin

Americans in general, and the most progressive elements in particular, were now to perceive the problem of the Middle East. The news was that the PLO had helped the Nicaraguan revolutionaries achieve their victory.

The lessons were obvious: while the Zionists take sides with the forces of reaction, the PLO is a natural ally of democratic and progressive forces. Again, the full impact of these events is still to be determined, but some of their effects can already be felt. To start with, the image of the Zionist entity as a democracy has been tainted, and there is a greater willingness to accept the correctness of the Palestinian description of that entity as racist, fascist and repressive in nature. "Israel" is now perceived in most circles as a merchant of death. Moreover, the traditional Zionist argument according to which the PLO is a terrorist organization, is now considered ludicrous by most of those who have seen and see "Israel" and not the PLO lending support and arming the worst practitioners of state terrorism in the history of Latin America.

On the other hand, the establishment, in some countries, of PLO diplomatic and information offices is making possible, for the first time, the development of direct ties between it and the different local, political and social organizations. The nature of the PLO as a sort of political front, which represents the different tendencies within the Palestinian movement, greatly facilitates this task and allows the Palestinian representatives to move freely along the Latin American political spectrum. Furthermore, the experiences of Nicaragua and Iran, in which the victory of the revolution was possible precisely because the opposition organized itself into vast political and social fronts, has given Latin Americans a better understanding of the real nature of the Palestinian resistance movement, and has enabled some of the most recalcitrant groups, both from the right and the left, to drop many of the ideological reservations they had regarding the PLO. Now it is clear to many Latin Americans that the PLO is a veritable "national" movement and that, taken as a whole, it is neither a "communist" nor a "reactionary" organization, as Zionist propaganda has variously defined it.

All these developments are having a salutary effect on PLO-Latin American relations. One of the clearest signs that this is so is the fact that, in absolute contrast to a few years ago when the issue was completely ignored, there are now very few political parties and organizations which do not include a statement concerning the Palestinian Question in their general pronouncements about international affairs.

The presence of PLO offices in some countries has been equally important for the process of redefinition of the relation between the PLO and the governments of the area. Many of these governments now show less reluctance to accept the PLO as a normal partner in negotiations, and some have even shown some interest in using the PLO offices as intermediaries

between themselves and the Arab world.

Certainly, the PLO could greatly benefit from a more effective and visible Arab presence in Latin America. Except for Chile, Venezuela and Brazil, the Arab presence in the continent is still minimal.

Another, not unimportant effect of the inauguration of PLO offices in some Latin American countries has been the reactivation and consolidation of the Palestinian communities. The offices have acted as a strong cohesive force, which has prompted the members of these communities not only to strengthen and reorganize the associations they already had, but to create new ones. This phenomenon has led the Zionists to accuse PLO representatives of seeking to destroy the traditional friendship between the Jewish and Arab communities of America. In the near future, as the process of consolidation of the different Palestinian communities advances, the use of their human and material resources for the promotion of the Palestinian cause in their respective countries could prove to be a very important catalyst for the development of stronger PLO-Latin American relations. Meanwhile, the new situation has already created the conditions appropriate to overcoming some of the traditional prejudices and misunderstandings explained above.

Thus, although – compared to other areas of the world – the understanding of and the support for the Palestinian cause in Latin America are still relatively modest, this reality is rapidly changing and one can expect that the Zionist influences in the continent will continue to decrease steadily. After all, they have nothing to offer to the Latin Americans, except weapons and their own brand of intolerance, both merchandises of which there is already a surplus in the continent.