

Too Big a World? Lula, Brazil and the Middle East (ARI)

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Tema: The new activism of the Brazilian government and its President, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in the Middle East has opened up a new front for Brazil's foreign policy, with significant risks to the chances of its experienced leader engineering a successful outcome.

Resumen: The decision to enter the tangled web that is Middle Eastern politics as an extra-regional player, in order to push peace negotiations and help solve conflicts in the region, is a brave one by the Brazilian President Lula da Silva. This drive appears to correspond more closely to motives of presidentialist diplomacy than to the cool and considered calculation of an emerging country's foreign policy. The desire to appear to the international community as a global player may well generate more trouble than benefits for Brazil.

Análisis: The five-day tour of Israel, Palestine and Jordan by President Lula da Silva from 14 to 18 March 2010 was interpreted as a new strategy by Brazil to appear as a new and neutral player on the Middle-Eastern stage: as a player willing to talk to all sides, excluding no-one. The visit to Damascus by the Foreign Affairs Minister Celso Amorim to meet Syria's President Bashar al-Assad is part of this idea of also involving parties that have been labelled problematic. The next step in this initiative should be a visit by Assad to Brazil next April, and a trip by President Lula to Iran, scheduled for May 2010.

Lula is the first President of Brazil to visit the Middle East (Emperor Pedro II was the last Brazilian leader to visit the region, in 1876). Plans for the trip were first hatched at the summits held in 2005 and 2009 between South American and Arab countries, both of which were promoted by Lula. Brazil also wants to debut in the region as the host of the Third Forum of the United Nations 'Alliance of Civilisations', to be held in Rio de Janeiro in May 2010. Lula's trip to the Middle East came at a time of considerable international tension triggered by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's announcement that Israel was building another 1,600 homes in East Jerusalem, which not only annoyed the US government, but also the Palestinian Authority (the latter immediately suspended indirect contacts with the Israeli government).

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Presidentialist Diplomacy

'Brazil has never before been as prepared to mediate in the Middle East conflict', were the Brazilian President's words in describing his government's readiness to take an active role in the region. However, it might be worth asking whether this initiative embodies more a personal ambition by the President or is the expression of a strategic approach devised by Itamaraty, as the Brazilian Foreign Ministry is known. A neutral observer cannot help but be surprised by the determination with which Lula has thrown himself into the role of mediator in a region that has previously not been a priority for Brazilian foreign policy. There are at least some doubts as to the reasons behind this new role for Brazil, especially considering that it has happened in the last year of Lula's presidential term, when it is quite clear that the candidates most likely to succeed Lula, namely Dilma Rousseff and José Serra, would neither be able or want to continue a project of this kind should they lead the government from the end of 2010 onwards.

Consequently, what seems to be prevailing is Lula's personal interest in positioning himself as a peace-builder internationally via Brazil's intervention in the Middle East. This effort is part of a period of intense foreign policy activity that is unprecedented in Brazilian history. As Rodrigo Mallea has pointed out, Lula has spent more than 385 days abroad during his two terms in office, meaning that he has spent abroad more than one year of his time as President. Since his inauguration, the Brazilian President has made more than 200 visits to foreign countries (including repeats) and has opened 36 new diplomatic delegations abroad. His efforts are aimed at enhancing Brazil's presence in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, as well as its active role in South America, which has been the cornerstone of the project to promote Brazil on the international political stage. Itamaraty, Brazil's Foreign Ministry, appears to have the human and physical resources necessary to maintain Brazil's presence abroad. It currently has close to 1,400 diplomats and more than 200 representative offices abroad, including 94 embassies and consulates, as well as trade missions and delegations at international bodies. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that the Foreign Ministry is starting to find it difficult to keep permanent track of the various fronts which Lula has opened during his time in charge.

The ongoing support of Celso Amorim, the Brazilian Foreign Minister and a trained diplomat, to the President's policy has somehow hidden from view the prominent role of the presidential advisor Marco Aurelio García, the architect of an active foreign policy managed very closely by the President himself. The fact that the disputes in regard to this two-pronged foreign policy have not led to major institutional conflicts within the government is testament to Lula's work. The common denominator is that Lula's trips coincide with the government's express policy of diversifying Brazil's foreign relations and its interest in promoting the Brazilian economy worldwide, precisely in those areas where it had been absent for many decades. A comparison highlights this policy shift: while Fernando Henrique Cardoso focused 49% of his trips as President of Brazil on North America and Europe, only 35% of Lula's trips have been to these regions, and he has preferred to focus on South America, the Middle East and Asia.

Lula can rely on Brazil's appeal as a bridge for other nations who see the South American giant as the best vehicle to achieve their own foreign policy goals. Brazil is seen as a player that facilitates understanding between different parties and is able to generate consensus regarding certain issues. Although this capacity may satisfy both Lula's desire for personal recognition and his wish to obtain recognition for his country by playing a major international role, it is worth recalling the other side of the coin, namely that it means assuming the costs of this role when Brazil is asked to absorb international

commitments. So far, the country has successfully managed to minimise these costs. Some analysts have pointed to certain areas in which Lula or his successor will have to take clearer positions, such as nuclear non-proliferation (Brazil has not signed the NPT protocol allowing access to international inspectors to civilian nuclear energy sites), and its concept of the international assessment of human rights protection, an area in which Brazil sees the wealthy countries' standpoint as biased with respect to human rights breaches in poor countries. It is evident that Lula and his presidentialist diplomacy have positioned themselves so that the burden of definition in this connection has been placed firmly on the lap of other players with a discourse based on north-south conflict. This option will not be open to Lula in the case of the problems that shroud the Israeli-Arab conflict, where he will only be able to criticise the imposition of the major powers in the region.

Brazil's Position as a Player in the Middle East: Lula's Dream

The Brazilian President's clearly articulated personal commitment to solving the Middle-East crisis was made evident in the constant invocation of his personal dream of seeing 'a Middle East free of nuclear weapons, as is the case of our beloved Latin America'. This tendency to apply Latin American experience was equally made evident by his continued references to the example of Brazil, where 'more than 120,000 Jews live [...] in full harmony with 10 million Arabs', a goal to be replicated in the Middle East. Brazil claims to be the country with the largest Lebanese population in the world, with 6 million Brazilian Arabs from the Lebanon, always insisting on the idea of harmony between races and cultures, while simultaneously declaring itself to be the second-largest African, Italian and Japanese nation in the world. This portrayal is accompanied by some central messages with respect to the future of the Middle East. It highlights Palestine's right to be a free and independent State, asks Israel to put a hold on the construction of settlements in areas that belong to Palestine and joins in rejecting the position of Iran's President when it comes to denying the Holocaust. Brazil supported the results of the Annapolis Conference in November 2007 to progress in finding a peaceful solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict in line with the 2003 Roadmap, as well as the commitments acquired at the Donors' Conference for Palestine in Paris in 2007, concerning healthcare, education and infrastructure.

Brazil was one of the five countries that abstained in the vote to condemn Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meeting in November 2009 and it was one of the few countries that has received the Iranian leader in the wake of the controversial elections of June 2009, which were followed by mass demonstrations that were clamped down on hard by the regime. This initiative did not find much support inside Brazil: 'It is awkward that Brazil should be welcoming the head of a dictatorial and repressive state. It is one thing to maintain diplomatic relations with dictators, and quite another to welcome them to our country', criticised the Governor of São Paulo, José Serra, one of the leading figures in the opposition to President Lula da Silva, during the visit by Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Brazil on 23 November last year.

The Brazilian government tried to prepare the President's visit to the Middle East well in advance, beginning with visits to Brazil by the main players in the conflict. In November 2009 and during a period of two weeks Lula received the visits of the Israeli President Shimon Peres, the President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas and the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. At the same time, in early 2010 Brazil's Foreign Minister went to Turkey to explain his government's position in regard to the Iranian nuclear programme, which had generated not a little concern in Ankara. Since Turkey, like

Brazil, has a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council until 2012, it will have to adopt a position in respect of any international initiative to extend and tighten sanctions on the Tehran regime. So far, Brazil and Turkey have defended the Iranian government's right to develop a peaceful nuclear energy programme, advocating a parallel non-proliferation and disarmament process in the region, but excluding the sanctions policy proposed by the US, EU and Russia.

The Middle East as a Partner in Trade Strategy

The activation of Brazil's foreign relations with Middle Eastern countries does not stem solely from the desire to support peace-keeping efforts in the region, but also from the wish to diversify trade relations and seek new partners for the Brazilian economy. As the Brazilian diplomat Marcel Biato has indicated, the interest in changing 'the world's economic and trade geography' now focuses on the Middle East, which is offered Brazil's broad productive platform. It was with this purpose in mind that Brazil approved the Mercosur Free Trade Agreement with Israel just before President Lula's trip. Israel has become the first country to have a free-trade agreement with Mercosur. Bilateral trade, which in 2008 totalled US\$1.6 billion, with a clear surplus on Israel's side, is expected to encompass additional areas besides the weapons trade between the two countries. However, the new FTA was criticised by Mahmoud Abbas, who emphasised in his talks with Lula that the agreement does not exclude the products of Israeli settlers in Palestine. The Brazilian Minister for Development, Industry and Foreign Trade, Miguel Jorge, proclaimed the willingness and commitment of Mercosur countries to begin talks with a view to signing an FTA with the Palestinian Authority. The businessmen in the Brazilian delegation highlighted their interest in hiring technical personnel in the region, especially engineers, to undertake the infrastructure projects ahead of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games. The announcement of plans to hold (in July 2011) a world economic conference of the Palestinian diaspora in São Paulo in order to attract more investment for this divided country, was applauded by Mahmoud Abbas, although, like his Brazilian counterpart, he will no longer be in office when the conference takes place.

Eleven agreements were signed with Jordan in the areas of science, technology and tourism, devised to offer a suitable framework to launch joint ventures in the future, especially in renewable energies, where Brazil hopes that its experience in biofuels will offer alternative solutions to this Arab country. As with Palestine, Lula offered King Abdullah talks for a Free-Trade Agreement, a project which he thinks could be brought forward to the second half of 2010, when Brazil will be President *pro tempore* of Mercosur. Bilateral trade is expected to increase to more than the US\$189 million recorded in 2009, when there was a sharp decline with respect to the US\$318 million of 2008.

Brazil as a new Interlocutor and Intermediary

It is not only from the Brazilian government itself that great expectations are being generated in regard to the country's possible role in the Middle East. New ideas are expected to emerge from a player whose action will not be confined to the established scenarios and that is able to interact with all the parties involved in the process and has an acceptable degree of legitimacy in the region. The Brazilian initiative rests on high-level contacts between Presidents, putting into practice Lula's watchword: dialogue, dialogue and more dialogue, which, in his view, means not cornering any party through sanctions but keeping all contacts and channels of exchange open. Bringing 'fresh air' to the region was the slogan of the President's first visit to the Middle East.

Lula alluded to the crisis in the bilateral relations between the US and Israel as a 'magical thing' that was opening up the space for a new approach to talks in the region. The disagreements between the two allies could, in his view, become a key to solving the conflict. However, the view of regional players with respect to the role which Brazil would like to play is quite different from the mandate which President Lula has defined for himself, as both Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas have highlighted. They both expressed an interest in Brazil's interceding before Iran to resolve the dispute on the nuclear issue and curb its support to Hamas. Lula's enthusiasm for meeting with Hamas does not appear to arouse much enthusiasm in these two countries, where the depth of the conflicts and the political dimension of any intervention is taken very much into account. After all, Hamas is considered a terrorist organisation by the US and the EU. Abbas's interest in having Lula pressure Tehran to stop providing Hamas with financial support and thereby end its interference in Palestinian affairs might correspond to the position expressed by Lula who wants to see a single unified representative of Palestinian interests, ending the breach between Abbas's PLO and the leadership of Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The quest to forge closer links with Jordan, the third stop on President Lula's trip, corresponds to his vision of this country as the 'pointer of the scale' to provide Brazil with the necessary space to implement its peace mission, enabling other countries in the region to be brought closer together. However, apparently, King Abdullah has remained quite aloof in respect of the Brazilian leader's request for support, because he is aware of the numerous efforts for mediation in the region, generally failures, which, like the Brazilian initiative, were full to the brim of good intentions.

The Dangers of Overacting in Brazilian Foreign Policy

Although the acid test in assessing the scope of Brazil's efforts in the region will be the degree of interlocution which the President is able to establish with Iran in his visit in May 2010, some essential elements of Lula's commitment to the Middle East can already be pinpointed.

In a sense, his trip to the Middle East represents the definitive 'launch' of Brazilian foreign policy with respect to its traditional political framework and its international counterparts. At the end of President Lula's second term in office, Brazil is trying to position itself as a central player in the Middle-East peace process, tapping its role as a new and innovative agent in the region, albeit one without experience in such a conflictive and polarised area. In this connection, it is surprising that Lula's hosts should confine Brazil's role to one of a bridge for dialogue with Iran, while Lula's own idea of his role appears to be much more ambitious: he sees himself becoming pivotal in achieving peace for the region. This difference between the roles envisaged for the country by the various parties involved threatens the bold but highly desirable effort on the part of Brazil. Evidently, the conceptual approach of the Brazilian government to the conflict is still shaped by the political style that Brazil has been practising in its own neighbourhood and its presence in various international forums: the quest for formal consensus and the transformation of conflicts through proceduralisation, since these solutions are all imbued with an interest in respecting the status quo of those involved and based on a group of neighbours going along with the initiative. However, the thorniest issues of the conflict, such as disarmament, religious and ideological disputes, the high levels of violence and the multiple dimensions of the conflict in the Middle East are ones that the Itamaraty is not used to and they represented uncharted, or at least barely-explored, territory for Brazilian foreign policy.

Although at a technical level and on the part of the Brazilian Foreign Ministry there may be a sound level of preparation and contextualisation of the latest efforts, there are still concerns that this initiative could imply a serious overstretch for the country and especially for an outgoing President, who has little time left to govern before his mandate ends in December 2010. Quite understandingly, the initiatives have been attributed more to Lula's personal ambition than to a serious evaluation of their likely positive outcome for the country. The President's rather insensitive approach to human-rights breaches, not only in the recent case of Cuba, but also in respect of Iran, has been surprising since it contradicts Lula's own continuous references to the values of his foreign policy. Brazil will have to pronounce judgement in May with regard to Iran's wish to join the United Nations Human Rights Council, and huge pressure is likely to build up ahead of its decision, since it would involve appointing to the Council a member with a very worrying track record of trampling on human rights.

An initial indicator of how complicated the situation is becoming for Brazil was the boycott announced by the Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who refused to attend meetings with Lula because of his reluctance to visit the tomb of the Father of Zionism Theodor Herzl, while in Palestine he deposited a wreath on the tomb of Yasser Arafat and inaugurated the nearby Brazil Street in Ramallah. He also had to contend with a grilling by the Knesset, Israel's parliament, and sharp criticism from Prime Minister Netanyahu, Knesset President Reuven Rivlin and the Opposition Leader Tzipi Livni, for his support of Iran, which is seen as a direct threat to the existence of Israel. This sets the limits on Lula's discourse of good intentions and defines the possible scope of Brazil's role as intermediary which could extend beyond the possibilities with which the country presented itself in the region, confined to the issue of whether henceforth peace talks might start again from scratch. The 'peace virus' as Lula coined it will not be easily spread around the region, and will need his presence in public and private talks involving other players. It is here that Brazil could find its role as enabler, if it adequately gauges its own possibilities and the scope of its presidential diplomatic effort. Against this backdrop, Brazil is on the way to learning the role of enabler which will involve accepting costs, taking positions and mobilising investments in international policy, without expecting the rewards of recognition at home or international applause. Brazil's 'prophet of dialogue' will have to carefully measure his political capacity if he is not to incur costs that could be counterproductive to his efforts to position Brazil as a global player by exaggerating personal audacity at the cost of overlooking a considered judgement of the country's interests.

Conclusions: Brazil's entry onto the Middle East stage at the end of the second term of President Lula da Silva has opened Brazilian foreign policy to a brand new field of action, both in relation to its trade interests and as an innovative player in efforts to achieve peace in the region. However, the expectations of those involved in the conflict and the established mediators in the region with respect to Brazil's role only partly match the aspirations of President Lula da Silva himself. Brazil and its foreign policy must therefore carefully gauge the scope of its presence and its commitment to the Middle East, so as to avoid complicating its own role on the international stage.

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