



PODCAST

# Latin America and Palestine with Hussein Sameh

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network · October, 2022

*The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.*

**Hussein Sameh 0:00**

We will have in Latin America potentially center or left-wing governments in Cuba, Honduras, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, and Argentina, and these could provide opportunities at the policy level. But we are still stifled by our leadership in how far these governments can go. So it does hopefully provide an opportunity for grassroots movements in favor of Palestine to find space to advance a more radical and progressive agenda than what's currently being offered by our leadership.

**Yara Hawari 1:10**

This is Rethinking Palestine, a podcast from Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network. We are a virtual think tank that aims to foster public debate on Palestinian human rights and self-determination. We draw upon the vast knowledge and experience of the Palestinian people, whether in Palestine or in exile, to put forward strong and diverse Palestinian policy voices. In this podcast, we will be bringing these voices to you so that you can listen to Palestinians sharing their analysis wherever you are in the world.

Recently, countries in Latin America, including Chile, Honduras, Colombia, and



Peru, have been experiencing a new rise in leftist leaders. Indeed, earlier this year, a leftist government in Chile, headed by progressive former student leader Gabriel Boric, was elected. This was and continues to be a significant moment for Chile, which continues to suffer from policies put in place by the Pinochet dictatorship.

Interestingly for Palestine, Boric is also a vocal supporter of the Palestinian struggle. In September, he postponed approving the credentials of the Israeli ambassador to Chile because of the escalation in violence against Palestinians in the West Bank at the hands of Israeli regime forces. Of course, many other Latin American leaders have also been staunch supporters of Palestine, from Hugo Chávez to Evo Morales, but Boric represents a new generation of leftists — what some analysts are referring to as the “green wave.” In other words, leftist politics that’s embracing both the environment and progressive social issues such as abortion rights as a key part of policy.

At the time of this recording, we were also in the midst of a general election in Brazil where leftist former president Lula is up against Bolsonaro, commonly referred to as the Trump of Latin America. Lula once said that his dream was to see a free and liberated Palestine, and he has more than once been seen donning a kuffiyah. Bolsonaro, on the other hand, considers the Israeli regime a staunch ally, and his policy vis-à-vis Palestine is characterized by his courting of Christian Zionist evangelicalism.

Joining me to discuss all of this and their political implications for Palestinians is Hussein Sameh. His research and writing has focused on foreign policy between Latin America and Palestine and the Israeli regime. He’s written for Al Jazeera English, +972 Magazine, and Mondoweiss. And more recently, he has worked at both Makan and Medical Aid for Palestinians.

Hussein, thank you so much for joining me on Rethinking Palestine.

**Hussein Sameh 3:07**



Thank you for having me.

**Yara Hawari 3:09**

Now, Palestinians have a long and varied history with Latin America — certainly not a homogenous one. But I was wondering if we could have a bit of an overview of the relationship between Latin America and Palestine and why it has been so important historically.

**Hussein Sameh 3:23**

The beginning of the history of Palestine and Latin America arguably starts with the migration of Palestinians to Latin America in the late 19th century and early 20th century. This is while Palestine was still under the Ottoman Empire. The majority of that migration were Palestinian Christians, and when they arrived in Latin America, they were colloquially referred to as *turcos* — Turks — because they were coming from the Ottoman Empire.

And there is a whole complex history of Palestinians' relationship with the various states in which they ended up. So the majority ended up in Chile, but there are also Palestinian communities across Central America and across the other states of South America. But this, as you stated in your question, isn't necessarily a straightforward history. Palestinians have had differing relationships with both the right- and left-wing governments that have emerged over the last century or so since they've been in Latin America.

So many of the Palestinians who originally came to Latin America came as merchants, and as the economies of those countries began to change, found themselves moving into industry and becoming industrialists. And I think this is an important point, because this relates to how these Palestinian communities then navigated the politics of the countries in which they were in. So Cecilia Baeza has done a lot of research on this, but essentially — and I think this will maybe be a



recurring theme throughout this discussion — is that class interests often muddied the water in terms of how Palestinians related to the states in which they found themselves.

The history of Palestinians in the region has differentiated, and Palestinians haven't necessarily always found themselves on the right side of history. You can find Palestinians across the political spectrum — Palestinians who were involved in leftist organizing, and Palestinians who supported the more reactionary right-wing regimes of the continent.

### **Yara Hawari 5:33**

So Hussein, from what you've said, Palestinians have really had a varied history across the Latin American continent. I was wondering if you could tell us a bit more about the Israeli regime's history with the various regimes and countries in Latin America.

### **Hussein Sameh 5:49**

Latin American states played a pivotal role in the creation of the state of Israel. In 1947, UN General Assembly Resolution 181 called for the partition of Palestine into two states. 13 of the then 20 Latin American member states voted in favor, and only one state actually voted against it — and that state was Cuba. This was a pre-Cuban Revolution Cuba, although I think at the time there was a reasonably progressive government in place in Cuba, although I can't give you the exact rationale as to why Cuba was the single country to vote against.

So Latin American countries played a pivotal role in partitioning Palestine. And between the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the war of 1967, Israel provided low-level agricultural assistance and economic assistance to those states, and the relationship between Israel and those states was relatively friendly. Israel was still also able to present itself as a reasonably progressive socialist state,



very much emphasizing the kibbutz experience as representative of what Israel stood for.

But that changed after 1967. After the 1967 war — where not only did Israel demonstrate its settler colonial roots and its aggressiveness and oppressive policies — there was also a change in what the Israeli state felt it needed to do in order to survive. Up until 1967, the majority of arms supplied to the Israeli state were provided by France. And 1967 was really when the US stepped in to be the number one financial backer, essentially, of the Israeli state. And this break with France led to the Israeli state looking to build its own arms industry and its own security industry in order to prevent being in this situation again without superpower backing.

And how that relates to Latin America: Israel then started to look for markets in Latin America in order to sell its weapons and to sell its military technology and military expertise. Latin America provided a very fruitful market at the time. In the 60s, 70s, and 80s, Latin America was home to numerous dictatorships and right-wing movements, and the Israeli state really monopolized those oppressive regimes in order to sell its weapons.

For instance, in the case of Central America, Israel was one of the primary backers of the Somoza dictatorship, supplying around 98% of Nicaragua's arms imports. They also supplied the anti-Sandinista Contras with weapons that they'd actually confiscated from the PLO in Lebanon. They also supported the regime in El Salvador and provided weapons to the Honduran state, which were eventually intended for the Contras who were fighting against the Sandinista Revolution.

Most shockingly, I suppose, is Israel's involvement in Guatemala, where General Ríos Montt, who launched a coup in 1982, actually attributed his success to Israeli military assistance and training.

And I think it wasn't just necessarily the weapons that Israel sold in Central



America, but also the ideology that it lent to these regimes and right-wing movements. So in the Salvadoran case, army colonel Ochoa Pérez actually said that he modeled his Salvadoran civil defense on a militarized version of the Israeli kibbutzim. Israel also had plans with the US to create a settlement-style scheme on the Costa Rican–Nicaraguan border, which was based on the settlement program in the West Bank and Gaza. The idea was to plant anti-communist farmers on the border as a means of containing the Sandinistas.

And then in the Guatemalan case, the military leadership actually referred to the process that they were carrying out against the indigenous Guatemalans as the “Palestinianization” of indigenous Guatemalans. This is a quote: “To treat Indians like we treat the Palestinians. Don’t trust any of them.” And this is what they were taught. In part, as a consequence of Israeli policy in Guatemala, around 75,000 Guatemalans were killed and 100,000 fled to refugee camps.

So although Israel didn’t actually involve itself directly in the region, through its military sales and expertise, they were able to provide assistance to these right-wing regimes. And I think that legacy is really important, because the consequences of it are still being felt today — not only in terms of the instability in those countries, but also in terms of how left-wing and right-wing governments then approached the question of Palestine.

The reverse of that, of course, is the relationship that the PLO had with left-wing movements. The Sandinistas in Nicaragua were a broad left-wing movement that was fighting against the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua, which was a dictatorship that was propped up by the US and its supporters. And so they had a very close relationship with the PLO. The PLO was alleged to have provided training and money and loans to the Sandinistas. There are also accounts of Sandinistas actually participating in PLO missions in the 70s. After the success of the Sandinista Revolution, in the first few weeks, I think the Sandinistas opened up an embassy for the PLO in Nicaragua, which was kind of a symbol of the



relationship between the two movements.

It's hard to know the extent of the PLO's involvement with left-wing movements in Latin America. Of course, there was a lot of rhetoric from both left-wing movements like the Sandinistas and the PLO in terms of mutual solidarity. The extent of that materially was often played up by forces within the US who wanted to tap into the pro-Zionist lobby, who had a vested interest in merging the anti-communist Cold War mentality with pro-Israel support. On the other side, it's important for those left-wing movements to also effectively play up the significance of this mutual solidarity. Now, that's not to say that it wasn't genuine, but it of course enhanced the reputation of both the PLO and those left-wing movements to espouse that they were working closely together.

When talking about the relationship between Latin America and Palestine, it's hard to discuss that history without talking about the importance of Cuba in that story. Cuba was the first country to cut all official ties with Israel in 1973. Until this day, Cuba has had no diplomatic relations with the Israeli state. Cuba was also alleged to have sent some troops and tanks to Syria during the 1973 war. And apart from the cutting of ties with Israel, Cuba has consistently been a vocal supporter of the Palestinian cause, including offering scholarships to Palestinian students to come and study in Cuba — primarily Palestinian doctors. This is something that still takes place up until today.

And the legacy of that can be found in the pink tide governments that came to power in the 2000s. Based on this legacy that Cuba had set, you saw countries like Venezuela and Bolivia taking very tough stances against the Israeli state, also cutting off all diplomatic ties in 2009. And following on from this, we saw a wave of state recognition of Palestine from Latin American states. Now, that's not necessarily the most radical act that a state can do, but I think contextually within the international scene, it had significance — probably more symbolically than anything else. So after 2009, when Venezuela and Bolivia cut ties with Israel, we



saw Brazil, Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia, and I think some other states recognize Palestine as a state.

**Yara Hawari** 14:09

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And I guess that's something that we're used to hearing about and seeing — the likes of Chávez and Morales, etc., and the leaders in Cuba talking about Palestine with such reverence. I guess what you're saying is that it's hard to really assess how deep those relationships were. And something that was also not surprising — that the Israeli regime exported weapons and training to these oppressive Latin American regimes — but I didn't realize how extensive it was and how deep it was. And I think a really important thing you also mentioned was how the Israeli regime exported its fascist and settler colonial ideology to these regimes as well.

Now, I want to hone in on Chile for a moment. Chile, as you've already mentioned, has the largest population of Palestinians outside of the Middle East. I think it stands at about half a million — quite a sizable population considering that we're only about 14 million globally. And you've touched briefly on the historical political relationship there. But I'm wondering, what do you think we can expect from Boric vis-à-vis foreign policy on Palestine? We know that he is a vocal supporter of Palestinian rights, but how far do you think he's willing to go?

**Hussein Sameh** 15:49

So Chile has up to 500,000 people of Palestinian descent who are mainly based around Santiago, the Chilean capital. They have a mixed legacy when it comes to their involvement in domestic Chilean politics, and due to their class interests — many of them making up part of the industrial class — many of them actually



ended up supporting the Pinochet dictatorship. Now, that's obviously not to say that all of them did. But I think there's this idea that Palestinians, by virtue of being Palestinians, are consistently righteous and on the right side of history. And I think that can often ignore the class interests of Palestinians in specific states.

Despite that, Palestinians in Chile have been consistently nationalistic and pro-Palestine, and there are numerous cultural and social Palestinian associations in Chile. Most famously, I think people probably know of CD Palestino, which is a football team based in Santiago, set up by Palestinians. Again, like many of the Palestinian migrants to Latin America — the original migrants — the community is primarily a Christian community coming from Bethlehem and Beit Jala.

Despite the Palestinian community's mixed legacy when it comes to domestic policy in Chile, the Palestinian community there has continuously been very vocal and politically active when it comes to the Palestinian struggle. This is represented in the social and cultural institutions that they've set up in Chile — probably best known is the football team in Santiago, CD Palestino, and their football shirts, which have caused a lot of controversy in Chile for showing the Palestinian map.

So when it comes to the leadership of Boric, I don't think we can underestimate the importance of the Palestinian community. The support for Palestine on the policy level in Chile spans both the left and the right wing. But I think it probably doesn't make sense to see Boric's support for Palestine primarily because of some kind of pro-Palestine lobby. Boric's background is as a leftist, and I think his left-wing activism or his left-wing ideals probably better represent why he has a good position or a stronger position on Palestine than others.

That being said, I think the potential for what this means for Palestine is difficult to answer. Firstly, because Chile, on a geopolitical level, even in the context of Latin America, is quite insignificant. Secondly — and I think this is a recurring theme for all the leftist governments or any leftist governments in Latin America that want to



do something for Palestine — they are constrained by the fact that they can only go as far as the official leadership of the Palestinian people in terms of what they can call for. So they're almost limited or constrained by the fact that the official Palestinian leadership isn't calling for more radical solutions or radical proposals to bring about liberation for the Palestinian people.

So in the case of Boric, recently he spoke at the UN General Assembly and he talked about the violation of Palestinian human rights and the right for Palestinians to have a free and sovereign state. This isn't particularly different from how Palestine is talked about at the international level. What it possibly can mean, though, is having a leadership in Chile — or indeed a left-wing leadership in other countries in Latin America — it does open the possibility for more grassroots organizing. The absence of a state that's hostile to Palestinian rights is something we can't take for granted when we look at the situation in the US and we look at the situation in the UK and the EU and the barriers that many grassroots campaigners are having in relation to pushing for Palestinian rights.

So I think the case of Chile is interesting and it's positive, but I think for many of the leaders, there is going to be this issue of how can we push the official narrative that our Palestinian leadership is giving us to push for more radical solutions.

There are also other interesting developments happening in other parts of Latin America. In Colombia, they've just elected their first left-wing government. And I don't remember who, but I've often heard Colombia being referred to in the past as the Israel of Latin America, which kind of speaks to the fact that Colombia has served for many decades as the bastion of US policy in the region.

And indeed, Colombia was one of the last countries to take this symbolic step — symbolic as it is — of recognizing the Palestinian state. Now, the government in Colombia is headed by Gustavo Petro, who was a former leftist guerrilla. He hasn't said too much about Palestine in the past. In terms of his foreign policy so far, or



what he's looking to do, we can see him making progressive steps in relation to Cuba, in relation to Colombian-Cuban relations and Colombian-Venezuelan relations. And so hopefully the new Colombian government can also provide an ally for Palestinians.

The last thing I wanted to say is it's also important not to overstate identity as a rationale for supporting Palestine. So although of course there is a huge Palestinian community in Chile, and that's going to have an effect on Chilean foreign policy, if we look at a state like El Salvador, which currently has a president of Palestinian descent — Nayib Bukele — he's actually gone out of his way to show himself to be a friend of Israel. And I think that's happened to the distaste of the Palestinian community in El Salvador, which is quite large. But that still goes to show that class interests or other interests can often trump identity. So we can't just rely on thinking, "Well, there are lots of Palestinians in this particular community, therefore we're going to have a pro-Palestinian response from the leadership."

## **Yara Hawari 21:33**

I think that's a really important point, Hussein. And another important thing you mentioned is that whilst the Palestinian leadership continues to fail to represent their people and put forward a radical agenda for liberation, we can hardly expect other states to do that for us.

I wanted to move on to talk about Brazil, because Brazil was in the midst of a general election. The runoffs are due to take place shortly after the airing of this episode. So I was wondering if you could briefly discuss the implications for Palestinians if Lula takes office, and also perhaps what might happen if we see Bolsonaro reelected.

## **Hussein Sameh 22:14**



I really hope that we don't see Bolsonaro reelected, but it is a possibility. The polls in Brazil are very tight at the moment. Lula was predicted to potentially win the election in the first round, but it is going to the second round. I think we can't take for granted a Lula victory.

Now, what a Lula victory would mean for Palestine — I think from a purely symbolic position or from a purely symbolic perspective, defeating Bolsonaro is a must. Bolsonaro has, as you stated in your introduction, courted the Christian evangelical right wing in Brazil, which is huge, and who are very vocal supporters of Israel. He has courted them by taking a policy on Palestine and Israel that is very much to the right. He's threatened to move the Brazilian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, although he hasn't actually done it, but he has opened up a trade mission in Jerusalem. He's also opposed investigations into Israeli war crimes — the ICC investigations. His sons were seen, while Bolsonaro was on a trip to Israel, donning IDF T-shirts. And I think the Bolsonaro movement very much looks to Israel as a bastion of right-wing values — of militarization, of security, of defenders of what in Brazil they call the "good citizens."

Now, what a Lula victory would mean: Lula has rhetorically been very pro-Palestine in the past. And like I said, Brazil was one of the first states to recognize the state of Palestine. But business as usual has kind of continued between Brazil and Israel in terms of trade. Despite Lula's progressive stance on Palestine, the MERCOSUR-Israel free trade agreement was signed during Lula's presidency. I don't have the exact figures to hand, but I don't think trade has stopped. And I think that's also the case in Chile — although Boric has drafted a law regarding settlement products, again, that's not wildly far from international consensus, and it doesn't go far enough.

And I think in the Brazilian case, it is very important that Lula wins. And I think Lula will at least rhetorically be, of course, a lot more pro-Palestine than Bolsonaro. But until we see changes in trade and arms imports, I think it's still very much



maintaining the status quo.

Lula has also had to move to the right in order to — well, in his opinion — in order to defeat Bolsonaro. So I don't know what Lula in 2022 will look like compared to Lula in the past. But he has, on the campaign trail, once again — I think as you mentioned in your introduction — met with the Palestinian community, worn a kuffiyah, and reiterated his support for Palestine.

Much like the rest of Latin America, at least at the leadership level or the state level, unsurprisingly, support for Palestine is still through the lens of statism. Because the only thing that the Palestinian Authority has to offer in terms of bringing about any changes is an establishment of a state based on the two-state solution — it's kind of the only thing that Latin American leaders can actually support. So again, until that changes, I think it's hard to see what the significance or what these leaders can actually do.

I think in the case of Brazil, Lula is likely to be hampered by the success of Bolsonaro in the elections. Although it's going to a second round, Bolsonaro actually did quite well, or at least his party or his supporters did quite well in the elections. Looking beyond Palestine, in a way, it is extremely important that Bolsonaro is defeated. Bolsonaro is not only a friend of Israel or supporter of Israel, but he has made attacks on Black Brazilians, on indigenous Brazilians, on LGBTQ+ Brazilians. And I think he stands against everything that the Palestinian liberation movement should stand for.

And just anecdotally, when I was in Brazil, when we went to the anti-PT — which is the party that Lula represents — when I went and visited the anti-PT protests, it would be common to see Israeli flags alongside Brazilian flags. And the merger of Zionism or pro-Israel sentiment and these right-wing values is scary to witness, but it also speaks to the importance of defeating Bolsonaro.

**Yara Hawari 26:46**



Hussein, just to bring this episode to a close, I want to ask you about the future of the relationship between Palestinians and Latin America. Where do you see it going, and what do you think needs to be strengthened in terms of allied ties with the region?

**Hussein Sameh 27:02**

As we've talked about today, Latin America is home to a large Palestinian population and community. And I think we need to continue to tap into that and to mobilize that base and to support that base and to provide resources for Palestinians who are often, in certain contexts, quite assimilated into their host state — to provide means or support in empowering them about their Palestinian heritage and history and politics.

So I think — not to ignore the fact that Latin America is home to so many Palestinians — I think we also need to move beyond the idea of engaging with Latin America just because it's the home of many people of Arab or Palestinian descent, because again, that ignores the class interests that some of those communities may have, which contradict perhaps where we want to see Palestinian liberation move. Like, it's not enough just to be pro-Palestine if that means that you are pro-business or it leads you to side with the right. We need to mobilize Palestinians to be progressive in all senses.

And I think that's why it's important for us as Palestinians to tap into or to support indigenous struggles in Latin America, to support decolonial organizing, anti-racist organizing, abolitionist organizing, feminist and queer organizing. And I think in many ways, what's exciting about what's happening in Latin America has probably less to do with Palestine and more to do with the success of organizing and protests in building power.

So Boric in Chile came into power off the back of — maybe not consistent, but — 10 years of protests on the street. The election of Gustavo Petro in Colombia



comes off the back of indigenous and mass movements in the last year or so. And I think that also speaks to the potential of Palestinians in diaspora to build connections and to build struggle with Latin Americans.

So during the uprising, or the Unity Intifada, last year, this coincided with these mass uprisings that we saw in Colombia. We saw on the streets of many places in North America and in Europe, Palestinians and Colombians protesting and marching together and making connections between their struggles and the support of the US in both projects and the militarization or their military connections in both countries.

So I think there is a lot to build up from. As I said before, we currently have — or we will have — in Latin America, potentially center or left-wing governments in Cuba, Honduras, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, and Argentina. And these could provide opportunities at the policy level, but we are still stifled by our leadership in how far these governments can go. I can't remember who said it, but they can't be more Palestinian than the Palestinians. So it does hopefully provide an opportunity for grassroots movements in favor of Palestine to find space to advance a more radical and progressive agenda than what's currently being offered by our leadership.

And I think on the other hand, we also need to be wary of the rise of fascism in Latin America. When we look at the recent elections in many of where these leftist leaders were elected, they were often running against far-right or right opponents. So much so that in the Brazil case, the irony is that Lula is now running with his former opponent in the last election. So the traditional right that Lula once used to battle against has now become an ally against the far right. So I think we do have to be wary of the potential right-wing backlash.

But we also need to be wary of the constraints that are going to be placed upon these left-wing governments once they come into power — the tension between



“development” and the most marginalized and indigenous people within those states. I think we also have to consider that Latin America is also made up of settler colonial states. The structures of these states are built on settler colonialism in a similar way to how the structure of Israel has been built. So there are still constraints for these left-wing governments.

And we also need to keep an eye on the rise of the Christian evangelical right wing, particularly in Brazil, who are very pro-Israel. That isn't to say, though, that we can't engage with them. And I think we need to maybe find avenues to think about how we can actually engage those communities around the question of Palestine.

**Yara Hawari 31:37**

Hussein, we're going to have to leave it there. But thank you so much for joining me on Rethinking Palestine.

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