

## **Trump's Jerusalem move in South America: falling on deaf ears?**

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The status of the city of Jerusalem has probably been the most controversial issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. United Nations Resolution 181 (II), which partitioned Palestine between a Jewish and an Arab state, established Jerusalem “as a *corpus separatum* under a special international regime and shall be administered by the United Nations”<sup>1</sup>. The resolution’s provisions, however, were never implemented, as a war broke out between Arab countries, who did not accept them as legitimate, and the recently-independent state of Israel in May 1948.

Ever since then, Jerusalem passed from the hands of Jordan, who kept control of the eastern part of the city (which included the Old City) after the 1949 Armistice, to Israel, whose conquest and occupation of all its metropolitan area in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War is considered by the Israeli as the ‘reunification’ of Jerusalem. On 30 July 1980, the Israeli Knesset passed the Jerusalem Law, which determined that “Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel”<sup>2</sup>. A month later, UN Security Council Resolution 478 condemned the attempt at changing the character and status of the Holy City as a ‘violation of international law’. It also called upon member states to withdraw their diplomatic missions from Jerusalem<sup>3</sup>.

Out of the 16 states that had their ambassadors stationed in the city, eleven were from Latin America. Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Panama, Uruguay, and Venezuela immediately pulled out their embassies in accordance with Resolution 478. It took two more years for Guatemala and the Dominican Republic to follow suit. In that same year, however, Costa Rica and El Salvador returned their representations to Jerusalem<sup>4</sup>. All South American countries, on the other hand, remained committed to the international legal provisions on the status of Jerusalem.

With the exception of Bolivia and Venezuela, who broke diplomatic relations with Israel over the 2009 Gaza war<sup>5</sup>, South America has traditionally adopted an even-handed approach to Israel and Palestine. They enjoy friendly relations with Israel – Argentina and Brazil are home to two of the ten largest Jewish communities in the world – and have recognized the sovereignty of the Palestinian people in recent years. When the United Nations decided to upgrade Palestine to the status of non-member observer state, in November 2012, only two South American nations abstained – Colombia, thanks to its close relations with Washington and Tel Aviv, and Paraguay, who had a right-wing provisional government at the time<sup>6</sup>.

President Donald Trump’s decision to move the U.S. Israeli embassy to Jerusalem, in December 2017, was met with skepticism across South America. In the UN vote that condemned the unilateral measure as ‘null and void’, all countries in the region voted against the U.S., except for three who abstained: Argentina, Colombia, and Paraguay. The first two, who had become Washington’s foremost regional allies, fiercely criticized Trump’s embassy move, arguing that it ran counter to a 70-year-old international consensus<sup>7</sup>. Paraguay, on the other hand, immediately stirred controversy by announcing that it would move its Israeli embassy to Jerusalem no later than May 2018. One year later, Brazil’s president-elect Jair Bolsonaro boasted he would also move the Brazilian embassy to Jerusalem as a sign of renewed friendship with Trump’s America.

By mid-2019, none of the promises have been fulfilled. Paraguay indeed moved its embassy to Jerusalem in May 2018, only to see it return to Tel Aviv four months later, as the new president, Mario Abdo Benítez, took office. Rather than the embassy, Brazil’s Bolsonaro decided to open a trade office in Jerusalem. This chapter’s goal is to analyze the complex decision-making processes that led two countries to change course on the embassy move. We argue that, although the U.S. has had considerable influence on foreign policy calculations, other international and domestic factors prevented both countries from jumping in America’s bandwagon by immensely raising the costs of decision. How these elements have played out will be explained in detail in the coming sections.

## **Paraguay: the origins of the Jerusalem move**

Paraguay's embassy move announcement came as a surprise to many, who did not expect a South American nation to abandon the region's tradition of even-handedness towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its commitment to the two-state solution. Under left-wing president Fernando Lugo, Paraguay was also part of a large group of neighbors, led by Brazil, who recognized Palestine as a 'free and independent state' between 2010 and 2011<sup>8</sup>. However, the rise to power of conservative president Horacio Cartes in mid-2013, after a year of turbulence following Lugo's impeachment, marked a change in Paraguay's broader foreign policy direction. Relations with the U.S. became the centerpiece of the new Paraguayan administration, as Cartes distanced itself from Brazil and Mercosur<sup>9</sup>.

The tiny landlocked South American country served Washington's interests in at least three respects: first, Paraguay could strengthen U.S. trade with the region by moving closer to the Pacific Alliance and deepening the divide between the highly U.S.-influenced Pacific and the Brazil-led Atlantic; second, it could boost U.S. military presence in the continent by allowing the establishment of a military base at South America's heart under the guise of fighting transnational drug trafficking<sup>10</sup> and terrorist networks, particularly at the tri-border area between Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil<sup>11</sup>; third, Paraguay's longstanding relationship with Taiwan helped keep Chinese political presence in South America at arm's length, in spite of China's growing trade flows with the region<sup>12</sup>.

Cartes also considered Israel a source of political and economic opportunities. The first step towards closer ties with the country was to reopen the Paraguayan embassy in Tel Aviv in 2014, twelve years after it had been closed in response to Israel shutting down its representation in Asunción (as well as in several other capitals and major cities)<sup>13</sup>. One year later, Israel also reopened its embassy in Paraguay, depicting it as an attempt to "make up for a mistake" made in 2002<sup>14</sup>.

It seemed clear that Paraguay's strategy was to curb Brazilian influence in the country by aligning itself with two extra-regional players that had strained ties with Brazil. While the relationship between Brasilia and Washington went through one of its most dramatic periods between 2013 and 2014, thanks to a row over allegations of U.S. espionage<sup>15</sup>, ties between Brazil and Israel had greatly deteriorated after Brazilian criticism over Israel's military offensive in Gaza, in the summer of 2014, and Rousseff's silence over the appointment of former settler leader Dani Dayan as Israel's ambassador to Brazil, in mid-2015.

In July 2016, Cartes became the first Paraguayan president to pay an official visit to Israel. His three-day trip to Jerusalem was mostly about trade and cooperation. Agreements signed on security and agriculture technologies challenged two areas of considerable Brazilian influence over Paraguay<sup>16</sup>. On top of it, Cartes took the opportunity to compare the Jewish Holocaust with the alleged genocide perpetrated by Brazil (and, to a lesser degree, Argentina and Uruguay) against the Paraguayan population in the war of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870)<sup>17</sup>.

Trump's election in late 2016 and his pledge to improve relations with Israel through the formal recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital were seen by Cartes as a unique chance to further deepen ties with both countries. In September 2017, the Paraguayan president met with Benjamin Netanyahu in Buenos Aires, as part of the Israeli prime-minister's four-day tour in Latin America<sup>18</sup>. According to the Paraguayan Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eladio Loizaga, it was Netanyahu who asked for the meeting with Cartes, who flew to the Argentinian capital especially for the bilateral event<sup>19</sup>.

On December 21, Paraguay abstained in the vote that condemned Trump's embassy move at the UN General Assembly. It was one of the earliest signs that Cartes was ready to change Paraguay's position regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico also abstained, as well as many Central American countries. They all received a public thank you note from Ambassador Nikki Haley, who said the U.S. appreciated "these countries for not

falling to the irresponsible ways of the UN<sup>20</sup>. On Christmas Eve – less than a week after the UN condemnation of the U.S. – president Jimmy Morales announced that he would also move the Guatemalan embassy to Jerusalem.

Morales's decision immediately spurred expectations among Israeli diplomats that other countries, such as Honduras and Paraguay, would soon follow suit<sup>21</sup>. That perception was reinforced by official Israeli sources some months later, which declared that both countries could move their embassies – but so long as Benjamin Netanyahu paid them official visits<sup>22</sup>. As Romania and the Czech Republic became the first two European countries to manifest their desire to follow Trump's steps, Netanyahu doubled the bet and offered a deal to the first 10 countries that moved their embassies to Jerusalem, granting Israel's most loyal partners favorable real estate conditions and preferential diplomatic treatment<sup>23</sup>.

Time was running short for Cartes as presidential elections approached in Paraguay. Critics such as former foreign minister Héctor Lacognata claimed that the question of Jerusalem should be addressed by the new government, as Cartes would not have enough political legitimacy to move the embassy at the dawn of his administration<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, the incumbent president probably would not have been able to live up to his promise in case the opposition had won.

The election of Mario Abdo Benítez, although a political rival of Cartes within the Colorado party, seemed like the perfect opportunity for the president to move his agenda forward. On April 26, three days after the election results, at a ceremony that celebrated Israel's 70th anniversary in Asunción, Cartes reinforced his commitment to moving the Paraguayan embassy to Jerusalem before the end of his term. Emmanuel Nahshon, spokesman to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, received Cartes's words as "very positive", but with some caution<sup>25</sup>. After all, four months after Trump's announcement, only Guatemala had confirmed its decision, which was scheduled to enter into force one day after the U.S. opened its Jerusalem embassy.

Paraguay's decision was further reiterated by foreign minister Loizaga on May 5. Two days later, Nahshon announced that Cartes planned to travel to Jerusalem later that month to launch the new Paraguayan embassy, information that was confirmed by the Israeli ambassador to Paraguay, Ze'ev Harel<sup>26</sup>. Indeed, on May 21 – a week after Israel's 70th anniversary – president Cartes flew to Jerusalem and stated that the decision of opening the embassy expressed "the sincere friendship and the utter solidarity of Paraguay toward Israel". Netanyahu, who attended the ceremony, thanked Paraguay for taking brave steps to "debunk numerous lies against Israel" and to support it in international organizations<sup>27</sup>.

### **The rollback of Paraguay's decision**

Critics abroad immediately slammed Cartes's decision. When Paraguay confirmed the move on May 7, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas said, at a bilateral meeting with Nicolás Maduro in Caracas, that he hoped no country in the Americas would follow Trump's steps, as it ran counter to international legal obligations<sup>28</sup>. The day before the embassy launch, senior Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) official Hanan Ashrawi reinforced Abbas's words and called the Paraguayan move "provocative and irresponsible"<sup>29</sup>. Her position was seconded by Ahmed Aboul Gheit, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, who also warned that the move would have a negative impact on ties between Paraguay and the Arab world, which could include political and economic measures<sup>30</sup>.

Opposition politicians attacked Cartes on similar grounds. Frente Guasú, led by former president Fernando Lugo, issued a statement calling the president's decision "irresponsible". Senator Desirée Masi of Partido Democrático Progresista (PDP) tweeted that "fanaticism, ignorance, and likely bribery along the way have put Paraguay in the middle of an international conflict"<sup>31</sup>.

The reference to bribery alluded to the relationship between the Paraguayan president and two controversial figures, Darío Messer and Ari Harow. Messer, known in Brazil as 'the master

black-market dollar dealer' for his involvement in corruption scandals brought to light by the Car Wash graft probe, is sought by Interpol and moved to Paraguay in 2014 to dodge investigations. Considered a 'soul brother' by Cartes thanks to long-standing family ties, Messer accompanied the president in his official trip to Israel and is said to have benefitted from presidential decrees on real estate, which sparked criticism from opponents and supporters on the eve of the 2018 race<sup>32</sup>.

Five years before, back when Cartes decided to run for president, it was the Brazilian dollar dealer who called Ari Harow, former Netanyahu's bureau chief, asking him to talk to the Paraguayan businessman and help "instill a warm place in Horacio's heart for the State of Israel."<sup>33</sup> Harow's consultancy firm H3 Global advised Cartes during the campaign and after his election in 2013, and he is said to have played a decisive role – together with two other former Netanyahu advisers, Yechiel Leiter and general Meir Kalifi – in the rapprochement between Paraguay and Israel<sup>34</sup>. According to one account, Harow – who became Netanyahu's chief of staff in 2014 – was responsible for the decision to reopen the Israeli embassy in Asunción, which ran counter to the professional recommendation of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>35</sup>. When the Paraguayan president arrived in Jerusalem in mid-2016, Harow was under house arrest on bribery charges. A year later, he became a state witness in two corruption cases against prime-minister Netanyahu<sup>36</sup>.

The incoming government also manifested its discomfort with the embassy move. President-elect Abdo Benítez complained numerous times that he had not been consulted on such a sensitive issue<sup>37</sup>. His foreign minister, Colorado senator Luis Castiglioni, affirmed that Cartes's 'unilateral' decision undermined the geopolitical balance in the Middle East, as well as Paraguay's relations with both Israel and the Arab world. Asked whether they would back off on the embassy transfer, Castiglioni said it was too early to tell<sup>38</sup>. Along the same lines, Abdo Benítez pled for caution and said that, despite Israel being "a good friend" of Paraguay, the new government would maturely analyze the decision and eventually reverse it<sup>39</sup>. In an interview that followed the embassy move, Cartes said he hoped his successor maintained the decision and underlined that he did not have to consult anybody because it was a 'constitutional prerogative' of the Paraguayan president<sup>40</sup>.

However, it would be just a matter of time before the new president reversed the embassy move. On September 5, less than a month after being sworn in, the Paraguayan government issued a statement saying the embassy would return to its previous location in Tel Aviv. Reactions were immediate: a few hours after the announcement, Netanyahu gave orders to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to close down the Israeli embassy in Asunción. In a statement, the Israeli government claimed it viewed "with utmost gravity the decision by Paraguay, which will cloud bilateral relations". At a news conference on that same day, Abdo Benítez regretted Israel's decision and pictured the reaction as 'exaggerated', urging Israeli authorities to reconsider<sup>41</sup>.

Pressure also came from Washington. U.S. vice-president Mike Pence promptly called the new Paraguayan president to discuss the embassy question. According to an official statement, Pence strongly encouraged Abdo Benítez "to follow through with Paraguay's previous commitment to move the embassy *as a sign of the historic relationship the country has maintained with both Israel and the United States*"<sup>42</sup>. Abdo Benítez defended his position on Twitter: "Paraguay is a country of principles. The spirit of the decision is that the people of Israel and Palestine reach a broad, just, and lasting peace. We will always respect international law"<sup>43</sup>.

Meanwhile, the Palestinians cheered Paraguay's decision and tried to take some credit for the move by calling it a "Palestinian diplomatic achievement"<sup>44</sup>. Palestinian foreign minister Riyad al-Maliki had attended Abdo's inauguration and had met with Abdo Benítez some weeks before and was said to have "exerted a big effort during his meeting with the new president who instructed his foreign minister to arrange the issue"<sup>45</sup>. Both Palestine and Turkey declared they would open up embassies in Asunción. In early December, Turkish president Recep Erdogan paid a historic one-day visit to Paraguay in his return from the G-20 summit in Buenos Aires, following the launch of the Turkish embassy<sup>46</sup>. Six months later, Paraguay reciprocated the

gesture and opened its embassy in Ankara<sup>47</sup>. The costs of moving away from Israel were allayed somewhat by the new opportunities with the Arab and Muslim world.

### **Brazil: tradition above politics?**

When president Trump announced he would move the U.S. embassy, Brazil's reaction was immediate and swift. On that same day, the country issued a press release reinforcing its understanding that the final status of Jerusalem "should be defined in negotiations that ensure the establishment of two states living in peace and security within internationally recognized borders and with free access to the holy sites of the three monotheistic religions, in the terms of the United Nations Security Council Resolutions, such as Resolution 478 of 1980, among others"<sup>48</sup>. The very same text was reiterated on December 29, a few days after Brazil had voted in favor of the UNGA resolution condemning Trump's decision<sup>49</sup>.

The Brazilian government's position was all but surprising. Brazil has historically been one of the staunchest advocates of the two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was a Brazilian diplomat, Oswaldo Aranha, who put the 1947 UN Partition Plan for Palestine to a vote as the acting president of the General Assembly. Brazil also sponsored Security Council Resolution 242, which urged Israel to withdraw from territories occupied in the Six-Day War of 1967. Even Lula's Workers' Party, often accused of taking sides with Israel's enemies, maintained Brazil's stance on the need for two states. While Lula recognized Palestinian sovereignty and signed a controversial fuel-swap agreement with Tehran in 2010, trade relations with the Israelis reached an all-time peak, as Brazil brokered negotiations for a free-trade agreement between Mercosur and Israel<sup>50</sup>.

Relations with the Israeli government have been strained since 2014, when the infamous 'diplomatic dwarf' crisis took place. It was named after the nickname given to Brazil by Yigal Palmor, spokesman for Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who opted for an un-diplomatic response to the Rousseff administration's criticism of the Israeli attacks on Gaza as 'disproportionate'.

Bilateral misunderstandings continued for the rest of Rousseff's term and involved a diplomatic row around the appointment of settler leader Dani Dayan as ambassador to Brasilia, whom the Brazilian government refused to accept by keeping silent over his name. While many assumed that Brazil's refusal had to do with the fact that Dayan represented illegal settlements in the West Bank, which ran counter to Brazil's diplomatic principles of the rule of international law and Palestinian right to self-determination, Itamaraty's official position was that they could not accede to Dayan's nomination because Israeli prime-minister Benjamin Netanyahu had done it on his social networks, not through the formal diplomatic means.

In any case, by the end of Rousseff's term, tensions with Israel had mobilized important sectors of the Brazilian Jewish community, of Evangelical Christians and of the Armed Forces against the government. Evangelical groups – and particularly neo-Pentecostals – have become the voice of Israel and of the Netanyahu administration, not rarely opposing Brazil's foreign policy positions<sup>51</sup>. The explanation lies in a phenomenon called Christian Zionism, which refers to the relentless defense of Israel – and the recognition of the Holy City of Jerusalem as Israel's 'complete and united' capital – as part of the biblical prophecy of the second coming of Christ.

On the other hand, groups that maintained economic ties with Israel, especially in high-tech sectors, started to fear that diplomatic tensions could jeopardize the purchase of strategic components. Having many defense contracts with Israeli military giants, the Brazilian Airforce, for instance, did not hide their dissatisfaction with president Rousseff as the Dayan crisis unfolded. That explains former Foreign and Defense minister Celso Amorim's public criticism of Brazil's growing dependence on Israeli avionics<sup>52</sup> - which was somehow ironic, for most contracts had been signed during his tenure at the Ministry of Defense.

In May 2016, as José Serra took office as Foreign Minister after Rousseff's impeachment trial, he immediately made a U-turn regarding Israel. In a quite unusual statement, Itamaraty threatened to change a pro-Palestinian vote at UNESCO that Brazil had cast a few months before in case the organization did not revise the terms of the resolution, which were considered 'partial and unbalanced'<sup>53</sup>. Some time later, Serra took a trip to Israel for the funeral of former president Shimon Peres – but unlike his predecessors (and successor), he did not visit any Arab country<sup>54</sup>.

All these moves were part of a calculated decision of getting closer to Israel for electoral purposes, which can be seen not only in Serra's desire of rooting out PT's influence in foreign affairs, but also in the São Paulo PSDB branch's proximity with the local Jewish community, whose institutions had long expressed their desire for 'normal' relations with Israel<sup>55</sup>, and particularly in the growing influence of Evangelical voters and leadership, who often treated ties with Israel as sacred and biblical, as game-changers of Brazilian elections.

Reality, however, has quickly imposed itself upon Serra's Mideast plans. Realizing that the pro-Israel stance could risk Brazil's historically positive relations with the Arab world, president Temer prevented Serra from changing the Brazilian diplomacy's traditional positions on Palestine in international organizations. That was, to be sure, an unlikely tug of war between the president and the foreign minister<sup>56</sup>.

Besides the potential of political damage at the heart of the government, the president's decision to keep Brazil's status quo on Palestine came under heavy fire from the Brazilian Israelite Confederation (CONIB)<sup>57</sup>, from prominent figures of the Jewish community, such as businessman Alexandre Nigri<sup>58</sup>, and from Evangelical congresspeople, who even sent a rejection motion against the government<sup>59</sup>. Naturally, Israel also expressed its disgust at Brazil's position. In Benjamin Netanyahu's Latin America tour, in September 2017, he skipped Brazil under the justification that he could not be certain, at the time the trip was planned, that president Temer would remain in office, given the mounting corruption charges against him and his closest ministers<sup>60</sup>.

Aloysio Nunes's tenure recovered a more balanced direction to Brazil's position. His decision to make an official visit to Israel in March 2018 appeased some sectors of the Brazilian Jewry. CONIB – whose president, Fernando Lottenberg, attended the foreign minister's meeting with Israeli prime-minister Netanyahu – obtained Itamaraty's commitment not to vote automatically against Israel in international forums, which was portrayed as a 'historic step'<sup>61</sup>.

Evangelical Christians, on the other hand, remained harsh critics of Brazil's position, not just because the Temer administration never challenged the recognition of Palestine as a sovereign state, but also because there was no sign that Brazil would move its embassy to Jerusalem, along the lines of Donald Trump's announcement of December 2017. Congressman Victório Galli, one of the most outspoken members of the evangelical caucus, attacked Nunes as a 'Marxist' who obstructed the improvement of Brazil's relations with Israel. "We must join the Trump administration and recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel"<sup>62</sup>.

### **The game-changer: Jair Bolsonaro**

As the October 2018 general elections approached in Brazil, one presidential candidate stepped under the spotlight with a controversial foreign policy platform. Retired Army captain Jair Bolsonaro promised a diplomatic about-face regarding Brazil's relations with two key countries: the United States and Israel. Bolsonaro never hid his admiration for Trump and always made clear that he wanted to reproduce the US president's electoral tactics and discourse, as well as his international strategy. His expressed desire to become best friends with the US even rendered him the nickname "Trump of the tropics"<sup>63</sup>.

Israel also became part of Bolsonaro's electoral strategy. The most obvious target was the Evangelical vote. Almost two years before launching his candidacy, in May 2016 the then-

lawmaker traveled to Israel as part of a congressional delegation to learn about irrigation and defense technology. Bolsonaro took the opportunity to be baptized in the Jordan river by the hands of the president of his own party at the time, the Social Christian Party, who is also a well-known Evangelical pastor<sup>64</sup>. In the months that followed, he made an effort to associate himself with an imaginary Israel, one of conservative religious and political values, represented by the flag of Israel waving side by side with the Brazilian one at all his rallies.

Bolsonaro's declared love for Israel explains why, in virtually every church Bolsonaro campaigned, he vowed to move Brazil's embassy to Jerusalem. His promise also helped him strengthen ties with important sectors of the Jewish community, fueled by a strong anti-PT sentiment and excited to have an openly pro-Israel candidate. "His victory in the first round made us very joyful and hopeful due to his friendship, love and bonds not only with the State of Israel but with the whole Jewish people. He will be a great president by having Jewish ethics and morals as his pillars," said Rio Jewish Federation President Ary Bergher<sup>65</sup>.

Pleasing Evangelical and Jewish communities was not the only goal of Bolsonaro's pro-Israel stance. Much like the role played by Steve Bannon in Trump's campaign, Bolsonaro's political positions were shaped by a group of radical nationalists, or the so-called anti-globalists. Inspired by the ideas of writer and self-proclaimed philosopher Olavo de Carvalho, Brazil's anti-globalists saw Israel as the heart of a whole new foreign policy strategy for two reasons. First, Netanyahu is seen as a key member of the emerging far-right nationalist movement, having become a role-model regarding "the resistance against the unwanted interference of globalists in country's national sovereignties"<sup>66</sup>.

Second, courting Israel would help Brazil strengthen its relationship with the U.S. on their common path towards saving the West and its Judeo-Christian tradition. That was the argument put forth by ambassador Ernesto Araújo in a controversial 2017 article, which many believed led Bolsonaro to appoint him as foreign minister<sup>67</sup>. On the way into becoming Brazil's 'tropical Trump', the day after Trump's announcement of the embassy move, Bolsonaro said in an interview that he would "do a Ctrl+C and Ctrl+V" of the American president's decree<sup>68</sup>. Mimicking the great neighbor of the North would become part of a renewed Brazilian identity. Seeking to reverse Lula's foreign policy legacy, Bolsonaro also pledged to break off with Palestine. "Is Palestine a country? Palestine is not a country, so there should be no embassy here. You do not negotiate with terrorists," he said in an interview<sup>69</sup>.

Bolsonaro's election triggered immediate responses from around the world. Conservative leaders as Trump, Netanyahu, and Italy's vice-premier Matteo Salvini publicly expressed their support for the new Brazilian president. "Diplomatic dwarfism now belongs to the past", celebrated Filipe Martins, Bolsonaro's foreign policy advisor and an unwavering anti-globalist. In an interview with Israel Hayom the day after his victory, the president-elect reinforced his commitment to move the Brazilian embassy to Jerusalem and said he would shut down the Palestinian embassy and change Brazil's voting pattern on Israel at the United Nations. On Twitter, prime-minister Netanyahu congratulated Bolsonaro for such bold promises – "a historic, correct and exciting step!"<sup>70</sup>.

Reactions across the Arab world were immediate. Hanan Ashrawi, a lawmaker at the Palestinian National Council, called Bolsonaro's embassy decision 'provocative and illegal'<sup>71</sup>. Hamas's spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said it was a "hostile step towards the Palestinian people, the Arab and Islamic nations"<sup>72</sup>. In the days that followed, the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, as well as the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, issued statements condemning the move. Less than a week after Bolsonaro's victory, Egypt called off an official visit by a Brazilian delegation of businesspeople and politicians, led by foreign minister Nunes, apparently out of disgust with the embassy promise<sup>73</sup>.

Getting closer to Israel by offering the recognition of Jerusalem, however, was not a consensus even among Bolsonaro's closest allies. The military, in particular, expressed their concern with the political effects of the decision of moving the embassy. A few days after the elections, vice-

president-elect, retired general Hamilton Mourão, said in an interview that the new government should be cautious not to take sides on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or else could become target of international religious terrorist groups<sup>74</sup>. The good working relationship between the military and Itamaraty's diplomats also brought concerns among the government's generals that the break with Brazil's traditional diplomatic positions, which included the utter respect for UNSC resolutions on Jerusalem, could put the country's international credibility at risk.

The agribusiness sector, a first-hour supporter of Bolsonaro's candidacy, was particularly dismayed by the embassy promise. Even before being appointed as Agriculture Minister, former congresswoman and leader of the agribusiness caucus Tereza Cristina voiced her concern that an Arab retaliation would be devastating for the entire sector<sup>75</sup>. After all, Brazil is the world's leading producer and exporter of halal meat and accumulates massive trade surpluses with the Arabs<sup>76</sup>. In the last 15 years, Brazilian halal beef and chicken exports skyrocketed from USD 706 million (2003) to 3.65 billion (2017). In 2017 alone, Brazil supplied the 22 Arab countries with 51.9 percent of their total animal protein imports<sup>77</sup>. Nevertheless, commodity trade was just a part of an even-greater trade surplus of more than USD 7 billion in that same year, which also included manufactured goods such as medical equipment and civilian aircraft<sup>78</sup>.

Anti-globalists and evangelicals, on the other hand, kept pressuring Bolsonaro for moving the embassy as soon as he took office. They were behind Netanyahu's decision to visit Brazil for Bolsonaro's inauguration, on January 1st. The former, represented by congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro, held a number of meetings with Israeli ambassador to Brazil, Yossi Shelley – all made public on social networks<sup>79</sup>, including one in which representative Bolsonaro was awarded an Israeli medal of honor<sup>80</sup> – and reiterated Brazil's commitment to the embassy move<sup>81</sup>. As for the latter, on the eve of the presidential inauguration ceremony, the Israeli prime-minister met with Christian leaders and underpinned his commitment to protect Christian interests: “We have no better friends in the world than the Evangelical community. And the Evangelical community has no better friend than the state of Israel”<sup>82</sup>.

As the Brazilian president was sworn in, Netanyahu declared that Brazil and Israel had just ushered in a new era of relations and were off to a magnificent start<sup>83</sup>. Although the Israeli prime-minister has never treated the recognition of Jerusalem as a precondition for improving relations with Israel<sup>84</sup>, he seemed eager for the embassy move and decided to turn it into a fait accompli. Besides attending Bolsonaro's inauguration, an unprecedented gesture by an Israeli acting premier, Netanyahu promptly sent a 130-member rescue team to Brazil to help with rescue efforts following the collapse of a tailings dam in Brumadinho, in the southeastern state of Minas Gerais, which left more than 200 dead in late January 2019<sup>85</sup>. While many hailed Israel's humanitarian aid as part of a renewed relationship with Brazil<sup>86</sup>, critics belittled it as a ‘publicity stunt,’ aimed at boosting personal ties between Bolsonaro and Netanyahu, as well as their nationalist-conservative agendas<sup>87</sup>.

Bolsonaro's promises also became vital for Netanyahu as elections approached in Israel. Ever since Trump announced the embassy move, the Israeli premier, whose reelection bid was largely based on breaking Israel's diplomatic isolation, launched a campaign for the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Hoping that Brazil's decision would spark a wave of pro-Israel positions across Latin America<sup>88</sup>, Bibi strategically invited the Brazilian president for a state visit to occur just days before the vote.

### **The compromise: Bolsonaro's Jerusalem trip**

The decision of whether to move the Brazilian embassy had not been made until Bolsonaro arrived in Jerusalem, on March 31<sup>89</sup>. There were high hopes that the Brazilian president would announce the transfer during the state visit. All signs pointed to it: in the weeks before the trip, the anti-globalist foreign policy team – foreign minister Araújo, international advisor Martins, and congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro – turned down two invitations for the president to meet with his Palestinian counterpart, Mahmoud Abbas<sup>90</sup>. Brazil also changed its voting pattern towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the UN Human Rights Council, aligning itself with



Washington and Tel Aviv in an attempt to do away with an ‘unjust and spurious’ tradition of taking sides with Arabs and Palestinians, in the foreign minister’s own words<sup>91</sup>.

Instead, in a joint statement with prime-minister Netanyahu, Bolsonaro announced the opening of an office in Jerusalem “for the promotion of trade, investment, technology and innovation”<sup>92</sup>. Given that it lacked diplomatic status, the Brazilian office was no different from the Czech House, launched in November 2018<sup>93</sup>, or from the Australian trade and defense office, opened ‘without fanfare’ a few days before Bolsonaro’s visit<sup>94</sup>. But it was certainly not as ambitious as Hungary’s trade office, inaugurated in mid-March 2019, which was promoted as a ‘branch’ of the Hungarian embassy in Tel Aviv and a clear step towards the full recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital<sup>95</sup>.

That was a frustrating moment for Netanyahu, who wanted the Brazilian president to work as his pitchman a week before the Knesset elections. “I hope, one day, that the Embassy of Brazil will arrive in Jerusalem,” said the Israeli premier<sup>96</sup>. Bolsonaro made no mention of recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital either, although his visit to the Wailing Wall – another unprecedented gesture, given that foreign authorities usually avoid including the Old City in their official itinerary, let alone accompanied by the sitting prime-minister<sup>97</sup> – and the references to the historical bonds between Jerusalem and the Jewish people<sup>98</sup> could be interpreted as a tacit recognition of Israel’s claims. Despite reiterated promises that the embassy move would just be a ‘matter of time’<sup>99</sup>, however, the absence of a tangible diplomatic triumph for Netanyahu was one of the reasons that led Bolsonaro to cut his trip short<sup>100</sup>.

Both friends and foes of the new Brazilian government seemed distressed with the opening of a trade office. Many evangelicals went to the social networks to express disgust at what they called a ‘handout’, including congressman Marco Feliciano, a popular neo-Pentecostal pastor and a loyal Bolsonaro supporter, who said that Brazil is intervening in the domestic affairs of a friendly nation by refusing to recognize the Holy City as Israel’s capital<sup>101</sup>. Moreover, Hamas immediately issued a press release calling on Brazil to reverse the decision and stressing that “this policy does not serve the stability and security of the region and threatens the Brazilian ties with Arab and Islamic nations”<sup>102</sup>. On the other hand, the Palestinian Authority, who threatened to recall its ambassador to Brazil for consultations, ended up adopting a conciliatory tone, asking the Brazilian administration to open up an office in East Jerusalem to deal with Palestinian matters<sup>103</sup>.

A week after Bolsonaro’s return to Brazil, it seemed the compromise had worked. Netanyahu’s tight reelection may bring fresh air to the bilateral relationship. On the very day of the Israeli premier’s victory, the Brazilian president had dinner with ambassadors of 37 Arab and Muslim countries at the National Agricultural Confederation. Promoted by agriculture minister Tereza Cristina, the meeting was set up to allay concerns that the new Brazilian administration was being hostile to the Palestinian cause or to interests of the Islamic countries. By the end of the dinner, the Palestinian ambassador told the Brazilian ministers and journalists: “This conflict does not belong do Brazil. Please stay out of it”<sup>104</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

The experiences of Brazil and Paraguay reveal the complex decision-making process behind the embassy move, which go much beyond U.S. regional influence. In both cases, we must consider the interplay between domestic and international factors. Despite personal links between Horacio Cartes and some Israeli high-ranked officials, geopolitical (and geoeconomic) considerations seem to have played a greater role in the Paraguayan president’s decision to transfer the embassy to Jerusalem – as well as in his successor Mario Abdo’s determination to move it back to Tel Aviv. Cartes clearly sought to improve ties with Israel and the U.S. as a way to distance itself from Brazil. Yet, Trump’s embassy move forced the outgoing president to anticipate a costly concession before tangible benefits came about. Given the possibility to improve trade relations with some Arab countries – which were increasing consistently since 2009<sup>105</sup> – and with Turkey, Abdo chose to return to the status quo, even at the cost of straining

relations with Israel and, to a lesser extent, the United States. Finally, Abdo's perspective of building closer ties with Brazil, irrespective of the electoral results, might also have reduced the impact of changing Paraguay's geopolitical position.

Brazil took much longer to opt for the embassy move. Although domestic pressure for greater ties with Israel had been increasing since the late Rousseff years, mostly thanks to the weakening of the left-wing coalition in power and to the consolidation of evangelicals at the heart of Brazilian politics, a solid diplomatic tradition toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict prevented governments – left or right – from changing the country's decades-old position on Jerusalem. This had little to do with Brazil's relationship with Washington: Trump's election and subsequent decision to transfer the embassy to Jerusalem, which coincided with president Temer's desire to strengthen ties with the U.S., did not alter Brazil's stance.

Not only did Bolsonaro's election represent a break with Brazil's foreign policy guidelines, as it also brought to power anti-globalists and evangelicals, to whom Trump and Netanyahu – and, therefore, the embassy move – were top priorities. This explains the mutual enthusiasm for a renewed Brazilian-Israeli friendship between the October general elections in Brazil and the April elections in Israel. However, the risk of hurting businesses with Arab and Islamic countries, which frightened meat and chicken exporters, combined with the potential political costs of the embassy transfer, pitted key government actors against each other. The result was what neither groups expected: the announcement of a trade office in Jerusalem did not please Netanyahu and his supporters nor did it appease critics, within or outside of the Bolsonaro administration.

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