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THE ROLE OF DIASPORAS IN PROTRACTED CONFLICTS: ARABS AND JEWS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE ISRAELI/PALESTINIAN ISSUE

The main objective of this research proposal is to analyze continuity and change of the Arab/Jewish relations in Latin America from 1948 till present, attempting to assess the causes for an increasingly confrontational situation.

In many cases, Diasporas have maintained a sustained concern about the situation in their countries of origin, particularly at times of violent disputes. There have been several studies attempting to explain such phenomena often including the case of Jewish and Arab communities. The latter includes both Christians and Muslims, and the second has been increasingly immigrating to Western countries, becoming a numeric factor as well as a more organized group. Jews have been established in European countries for centuries and the word Diaspora was in fact related to such dispersion throughout the world. In the Zionist vision, their identity as living in “exile” from the land of the ancestors increased enormously with the creation of Israel in 1948. The centrality of this state has been further emphasized by the large number of wars that took place since its establishment (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, 1991, 2006, and 2008). The repercussion of the conflict between the Jewish state on the one hand, and Arab countries and Palestinians in particular, expressed itself in a growing number of attacks against civilians. The original clash of two nations claiming rights over the Holy Land became over the years a violent conflict driven primarily by religious extremist groups in both societies. Often justified in terms of Israel as an outpost of the West, it has been widely regarded as a clash of civilizations exponentially illustrated by the massive terrorist act of September 11, 2001.

Both Arabs and Jews converged in significant numbers in their emigration to Latin America mostly from early XIXth century. The region has also experienced a growing threat and actual use of violence related to the Israeli/Arab conflict. This late development has paradoxically occurred in a region where relations between their respective Diasporas have been cordial, often involved in similar business and professional activities. In a period when the level of ideological and political armed struggle has decreased throughout most of the subcontinent, we witness the salience of this

ethnopolitical polarization. Hence, instead of “exporting” their good previous experience of coexistence to the fractured Middle East, Diasporas are now perceived as “importing” this conflict to Latin America.

The following structure has been advanced to provide a systematic understanding of the issues brought up in this preliminary outline:

- A brief background of the establishment and development of Arab and Jewish communities in Latin America including demographic and socio-economic data.
- The attitudes of those Jewish and Arab Diasporas to their countries of origin.
- An in-depth analysis of the contemporary situation, with particular emphasis on the impact of religion, wars and violence and peace processes mostly focusing on the Israeli/Palestinian dimension.
- The attitude of Israel, Arab countries and Iran to their brethren in Latin America.
- The outreach of religious extremism and its effect on the polarization of the Jewish and Arab communities in Latin America.
- Relations between Arabs and Jews in Latin America.
- In depth analysis of the above variables in selected cases studies: Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela and a Central American country (the number of cases could be reduced depending the duration of the research project – optimal time: six months).

The researcher is a political scientist working in the areas of human rights and conflict management with particular emphasis on Latin America and Middle East. He has been studying and concerned about the research subject through many decades. Born in Argentina and immigrating to Israel, he was the main author of a book on Israel-Latin American relations, including chapters and articles focusing more specifically on Arabs and Jews in this region. Furthermore, over the 1980's in particular he monitored, analyzed and published several articles on the military and security dimension of Middle East/Latin American ties. In the last decade he invested a significant part of his efforts in applied research exploring how to transform the learning from Abrahamic religions from dispute to a common denominator of co-existence. Within such efforts, he has been learning of the experience on the terrain, often coming to Latin American countries and at times with a Palestinian colleague (Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil), with whom he has been

team-teaching for sixteen years each summer at the University of Maryland. Such endeavors have help establishing ties with both Jewish and Arab communities in the mentioned countries and others.

Throughout the last years, when frequently traveling to the region, he has been sporadically gathering information and personal experience about this potential research subject. The possibility of coming to the W. Wilson International Center of Scholars for a semester (preferred period July-December 2011) will enable him to complete the data gathering, analysis and reaching conclusions. Hence, he hopes to contribute not only for a better understanding of the subject but also help those concerned with moving away from confrontation and violence towards the search of common ground among the Abrahamic religions and related Diasporas in Latin America.