

Israel provokes diplomatic row with Brazil over Gaza, Hezbollah

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As Israel's genocidal war in Gaza escalates amid mass global protests, an extraordinary series of events took place last week in Brazil, fueling diplomatic tensions between the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party – PT) and Israel.

This occurred as the US and its allies in the G7 directly threatened Iran with war over its support for Hamas and Hezbollah and, more importantly, its growing economic and military relations with Russia and China. Brazil and many Latin American countries have strong economic ties with China and, to a lesser extent, Russia and Iran, the latter of which recently joined Argentina and four other countries in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) as part of the bloc's bid to build a "multipolar" world in opposition to US hegemony.

US concerns about the presence of China, Russia and Iran, as well as "Hezbollah activities" in Latin America, were voiced in early October, shortly after the start of Israel's war on Gaza, by Gen. Laura Richardson, head of the US Southern Command.

In an interview with the right-wing think tank Foundation for Defense of Democracies, General Richardson denounced "Iranian warships that ... ended up making a port call in Rio de Janeiro" in February and the visits to several Latin American countries in the first half of the year by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. Adding that the region is "insecure and unstable," she said, "we can do better in this vulnerable time to keep out strategic competitors that have malign intentions."

In this context, the Israeli government, with the full support of the US, launched a provocative diplomatic offensive aimed at destabilizing the Lula government and pressuring it to align itself with both its war against Gaza and the US war preparations against Iran. These moves came after Brazil tried to pass a resolution in October, when it chaired the UN Security Council, advocating a pause in Israel's attacks in order to create a humanitarian corridor. The US vetoed the resolution, citing its failure to refer to Israel's supposed "right to self-defense."

Throughout November, Brasilia stepped up its criticism of Israel's attacks on Gaza. However, unlike the pseudo-leftist presidents of Colombia (Gustavo Petro) and Chile (Gabriel Boric), who recalled their ambassadors, Lula limited himself to equating the actions of Israel and Hamas, saying on November 13: "Hamas has committed a terrorist act.... Israel is also committing various acts of terrorism by not taking into account that the children are

not at war." Lula has also defended the creation of a Palestinian state, but without referring to the need for Israel to leave the territories occupied in the 1967 war.

As part of the Israeli government's effort to drum up international support for its war in Gaza, its ambassador to Brazil, Daniel Zonshine, met on November 8 with far-right parliamentarians and fascistic ex-president Jair Bolsonaro in the Brazilian Congress to show alleged footage of the Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel. Members of parliament aligned with the Lula government were not invited to the meeting.

According to international journalist Jamil Chad, of the *UOL* website, Brazil's Foreign Ministry considered the meeting "a serious breach of protocol, an intrusion into domestic politics and a complicated relationship with a public figure who is ineligible." However, Bolsonaro is more than ineligible to run for office. In addition to being defeated in last year's presidential election by Lula, he was recently indicted by a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry as the intellectual author of an attempted coup d'état on January 8, when his supporters stormed government buildings in Brasilia.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu considers Bolsonaro a close political partner. Over the four years of Bolsonaro's administration (2019-2022), Brazil drew far closer to both Israel under Netanyahu and to the US under Donald Trump. Moving the Brazilian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and recognizing Israeli sovereignty in the illegally occupied territories, the Bolsonaro government also supported the US assassination of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani.

The choice of the Brazilian Congress for the meeting between the Israeli ambassador and Bolsonaro served the purposes of the Brazilian far right, Israel and the US. Parliamentarians loyal to Bolsonaro presented bills in October classifying Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorists and equating support for them with the crime of promoting Nazism—an equation that Bolsonaro and the Brazilian extreme right has repeatedly made with socialism. One of the bills also states that Brazil should cut diplomatic and economic relations with their supporters, indirectly targeting Iran.

Another event that has increased diplomatic tension since the beginning of the war was the delay in allowing 34 Brazilians to leave Gaza, which came only at the beginning of this week. On the same day as the meeting with Bolsonaro, the Israeli ambassador gave the first justification for this delay, claiming that "the quota for leaving the Gaza Strip is determined by Egypt." This, in turn,

was denied by Brazilian Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira, pointing to the political reasons for Israel's decision to prevent their escape.

As if November 8 hadn't been turbulent enough, the Brazilian Federal Police announced on the same day the temporary arrest of two suspects allegedly linked to Hezbollah for planning terrorist attacks in Brazil against the Jewish community. According to the daily *Estado de S. Paulo*, "The action had the collaboration of American and Israeli authorities."

On X/Twitter, the Netanyahu government celebrated the arrests, writing: "Brazilian security services, together with the Mossad and their partners in the Israeli security community, along with other international security agencies, thwarted a terrorist attack in Brazil, planned by the terrorist organization Hezbollah, directed and financed by Iran."

In response, the Brazilian Minister of Justice, Flávio Dino, said that "No representative of a foreign government can claim to anticipate the outcome of an investigation conducted by the Federal Police, which is still ongoing." In fact, in the detainees' statements to the Federal Police, they denied any connection with Hezbollah. The lawyer of one of them stated that "He didn't know what Hezbollah or Hamas were."

In addition, a series of doubts vocalized even by Brazil's own bourgeois media have emerged because of these arrests. Firstly, there are no perceivable motives for either Hezbollah or Iran to threaten a terrorist attack in Brazil.

Brazil has a Lebanese community larger than Lebanon's own population of 6 million. Especially since the US "war on terror" in the early 2000s, there have been claims of Lebanese-Brazilians being involved in money laundering and links to drug trafficking—mainly in the triple border region between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay—to finance Hezbollah's activities in Lebanon. No concrete evidence has been presented to support these allegations.

Secondly, it is not Hezbollah's modus operandi to carry out actions outside Lebanon, let alone terrorist attacks. Recalled as a landmark of alleged terrorist activity in Latin America, the attacks on the Israeli embassy in 1992 and on the AMIA Jewish association in 1994, both in Argentina, were not claimed by Hezbollah. Actually, its only declared activity abroad was in Syria, when it fought the Islamic State and US-backed Al Qaeda-linked militias in support of Bashar al-Assad's government.

Hezbollah is the direct product of the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982. Since 1992, in the first elections after the civil war (1975-1990) in Lebanon, it has been one of the main political forces of the Lebanese parliament and has wide support among the most oppressed sections of the country's Shia population. In 2000, Israel left southern Lebanon, but in 2006 it launched a massive invasion against the region, supported by the US, which ended in a debacle for Israel and the US.

Both Washington and Israel view Hezbollah as an obstacle to their strategic interests. They want to eliminate it from Lebanon and facilitate a future US military offensive against Iran. The US considers Brazil and Latin America to be a strategic battleground in this process.

While Lula condemned Israel's actions in Gaza as the most "brutal and inhuman violence against innocent people" he had

ever seen, his government has failed to issue so much as a formal protest over the provocations staged by the Israeli ambassador, much less expel him from the country.

Behind this delicate diplomatic approach is the fear of upsetting relations not merely with Israel, but more importantly with its principal and indispensable patron, US imperialism.

Since coming to power, Lula has advanced the claim that the government of "Genocide Joe," as the American president has been denounced in many protests, represents an important factor in democratic stability in Brazil and the world. More recently, he has praised Joe Biden as the most "pro-worker" president in history.

Significantly, the script for last week's events in Brazil was unveiled in an article published by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies at the end of October. Entitled "Hezbollah's Terror Threat In Latin America," Emanuele Ottolenghi wrote that "The U.S. and Israeli governments are rightly concerned that Hezbollah—Iran's oldest and best-armed proxy—... could create a second front in northern Israel, and it could add pressure on Israel and the US by launching terror attacks abroad."

He recalled that "Latin America is a region of particular concern in this respect" because "Hezbollah is not considered a terrorist organization in most countries." In addition to arguing that, "The Biden administration should encourage more governments to sanction Hezbollah as a terror group," Ottolenghi stressed that "The US government needs to be proactive and take to the offensive against Iran and Hezbollah's pervasive soft-power and hard-power operations in the region."

But more importantly, Ottolenghi wrote that "There is radical mobilization in favor of the Palestinian cause across the region, much of which is fomented by Iran-backed disinformation." Indeed, as part of a global mass movement against the genocide in Gaza, protests have been held weekly in Brazil and many Latin American countries.

Amid the diplomatic tensions with Israel and pressure from the US to align Brazil with its war plans against Iran and China, what the Lula government and the ruling elites in Latin America fear most is that this movement will intersect with an emerging working class movement against their austerity policies and criminally negligent approach to the ongoing pandemic.

As the WWSWS and the International Committee of the Fourth International have insisted, the key issue is to provide the millions of people who have been taking part in weekly protests against Israel's genocide with a political perspective based on the working class. As elaborated in the statement "The way forward in the struggle against genocide in Gaza," this requires "building a political leadership that aims at the conquest of power by the working class, the overthrow of capitalism and imperialism and the establishment of socialism on a world scale."



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