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Artigo

Arabs in Brazil: an overview of a half of a millennium relationship

Árabes no Brasil: uma visão geral de uma relação de meio milênio

Árabes en Brasil: una visión general de una relación de medio milênio

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ABSTRACT
This paper provides a concise historical overview of Arab-Brazilian relations, spanning nearly five centuries, to serve as an accessible entry point for scholars new to this field of study. It presents a structured framework that divides this evolving relationship into six distinct periods, each characterized by successive waves of Arab and Muslim migration to Brazil, beginning in the 16th century and continuing into the present day. By examining these key phases, the study highlights the cultural, economic, and political influences that have shaped Arab-Brazilian interactions over time, offering valuable insights for researchers exploring this complex and dynamic historical connection.
Keywords: *Arab-Brazilian relations; Latin America–Middle East relations; Arab diaspora*

RESUMO
Este artigo apresenta uma visão histórica concisa das relações árabe-brasileiras, abrangendo quase cinco séculos, servindo como um ponto de entrada acessível para pesquisadores que ingressam nesse campo de estudo. Ele propõe um quadro estruturado que divide essa relação em seis períodos distintos, cada um marcado por sucessivas ondas de migração árabe e muçulmana para o Brasil, desde o século XVI até os dias atuais. Ao examinar essas fases-chave, o estudo destaca as influências culturais, econômicas e políticas que moldaram as interações árabe-brasileiras ao longo do tempo, oferecendo insights valiosos para pesquisadores que exploram essa complexa e dinâmica conexão histórica.
Palavras-chave: *relações árabe-brasileiras; relações América Latina-Oriente Médio; diáspora árabe*

RESUMEN
Este artículo ofrece una visión histórica concisa de las relaciones entre árabes y brasileños, abarcando casi cinco siglos, con el objetivo de servir como un punto de entrada accesible para investigadores nuevos en este campo de estudio. Presenta un marco estructurado

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que divide esta relación en evolución en seis períodos distintos, cada uno caracterizado por sucesivas oleadas de migración árabe y musulmana a Brasil, desde el siglo XVI hasta la actualidad. Al examinar estas fases clave, el estudio resalta las influencias culturales, económicas y políticas que han moldeado las interacciones árabe-brasileñas a lo largo del tiempo, proporcionando valiosos conocimientos para los investigadores que exploran esta conexión histórica compleja y dinámica.
Palabras clave: *relaciones árabe-brasileñas; relaciones América Latina-Oriente Medio; diáspora árabe*

Introduction

Arab-Brazilian relations constitute a fundamental aspect of the politics and sociability of the Global South. To fully grasp the intricate web of exchanges and interdependencies that gave rise to the very concept of the Global South1, one must inevitably examine the historical development of this relationship. The Arab-Muslim presence in Brazil has been a subject of scholarly interest in the Social Sciences since the early 20th century, featuring prominently in foundational works such as Gilberto Freyre's *The Masters and the Slaves* (1956) and Manoelito de Ornellas' *Gaúchos e Beduínos* (2012), among others.It reflects "a large history of transnational cultural struggles, migration stories, and battles over race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, and the State" (Amar, 2014, p. 9). Nonetheless, scholars examining this subject must navigate a series of challenges, including the scarcity—or even the complete absence—of historiographical works, diplomatic reports, and bibliographical resources. Additionally, the relative alienation imposed by centuries of colonial domination, along with the persistent Western-centric perspectives that continue to shape Political and Social Sciences in general, and International Relations (IR) in particular, cannot be overlooked. Once researchers take their initial steps into this field, they are confronted with a fundamental challenge: determining where to begin their study.

To assist newcomers in this field in navigating the complex 500-year history of Arab-Brazilian relations, this article proposes a straightforward roadmap that divides this relationship into six distinct periods. These phases, which are sometimes successive and sometimes overlapping, remain dynamic and are thus characterized as "waves." Our objective is to provide a historical overview that allows those unfamiliar with the subject to engage with Arab-Brazilian relations in a structured manner. To this end, we have developed a framework that narrates the long history of interactions between Arabs and Brazilians as "waves of arrivals," which we define as follows[3]:

Waves of Arab(ness)-ic-Muslims arrivals in Brazil
1) Arabness/Arabic arrives (16th century)
2) Arab peoples arrive (19th/20th century)
3) Arab(ic) literature arrives (19th/20th century)
4) Arab oil and money arrive (1970s)
5) Arab heads of state arrive (2005)
6) Arab studies arrive (2000s)

3 This periodization was proposed by Dr. Ferabolli in 2023 in different talks and conferences. See: "What happens when Paulo Freire meets the Arab World?" at Columbia University; "African – Middle Eastern – Latin American Relations: A Study of Five Centuries of Arab-Muslim Presence in Brazil" at Yale University; "Five centuries of Arab-Muslim presence in Latin America" at the BRISMES Annual Meeting; "Relações Árabes-Brasileiras: Cinco Séculos de História" at Universidade Federal de Pelotas.

In the following pages, we illustrate how these waves have shaped the five-century-long presence of Arabs in Brazil.

The arrival of Arabness/ Arabic (16th century)

Arabness arrived in Brazil alongside the first colonizers, who came from the Iberian Peninsula—a region where, for centuries, Arabic functioned as the lingua franca of intellectual, scientific, and cultural exchange in both the Mediterranean and the Iberian world (González-Ferrín, 2018). Moreover, it is assumed that some of the sailors in the fleet led by Pedro Álvares Cabral were of Arab or moçárabe origin. As a colony integrated into the Portuguese Empire and later part of the Iberian Union (1580–1640), Brazil was deeply influenced by an Iberian historical and social context that had been profoundly shaped by eight centuries of Arab presence (Ferabolli, 2023).

If Arab-Brazilian relations can be traced back to the arrival of the first European colonizers in the New World, the presence of the Arabic language in Brazil predates the formal Arab immigration to the continent. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, approximately five million Africans were brought to Brazil through the Atlantic slave trade, among whom were thousands of Muslims with some degree of Arabic literacy. As a result, Arabic became a language of political organization among enslaved African Muslims in Brazil. Evidence of Arab literacy and Islamic ceremonies performed by enslaved Africans, in which the Arabic language played a central role, can be traced back to the 18th century. Brazil, which gained independence from Portugal in 1822, was the last country in the world to abolish legal slavery, in 1888. Reis (1986) highlights that enslaved individuals from the Gold Coast included significant numbers of Muslims, "especially Malinkes, here called Mandingos" (Reis, 1986, p. 111). Inter-ethnic wars and conflicts between West and Central African kingdoms played a significant role in the capture and trafficking of enslaved peoples. From the late 18th to the late 19th century, and particularly due to the expansion of Islam in West Africa, large numbers of Hausa, Yoruba (referred to as *Nagôs* in Brazil), Minas, and neighboring Muslim communities were brought to Brazil (Reis, 1986).

Hausa and Yoruba individuals, many of whom were literate in Arabic at a time when most of the Brazilian elite remained illiterate, played a central role in the Malês Uprising (Revolta dos Malês), the largest insurrection of enslaved Africans in Brazilian history. The revolt took place in Salvador, Bahia, in January 1835 and involved at least 600 Africans (Reis, 1986). Although the violent suppression of the Malês Uprising failed to eradicate Islamic practices among enslaved Africans, it forced practitioners to adopt significant measures of secrecy and discretion to avoid detention, torture, and execution. Despite confiscations, arrests, and purges, an underground Islamic presence persisted in Salvador and even in Rio de Janeiro, then the imperial capital. Furthermore, many Hausa, Yoruba, and Minas, among others, were sold to slave owners in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost province, bordering Uruguay and Argentina. In October 1838, police forces in Porto Alegre disrupted what they described as a Black Mina club and confiscated Arabic handwritten documents from its members (Reis, Gomes, & Carvalho, 2020).

In 1866, the Ottoman Imam Abd al-Rahman al-Baghdadi arrived in Rio de Ja-

neiro, where he established connections with African Muslims who sought his guidance and invited him to preach for their communities (Al-Baghdadi, 2007). Similarly, in 1869, Count Gobineau, then the French ambassador to Brazil, reported that two French booksellers in the country sold up to a hundred copies of the Qur'an annually (Gobineau apud Costa e Silva, 2004). The accounts of Al-Baghdadi and Gobineau may reflect a broader shift in Brazilian society during the second half of the 19th century, as a more liberalizing socio-political environment began to emerge. This period saw the gradual erosion of the Catholic Church's once absolute authority over the country's religious landscape. It is no coincidence that, by the early 20th century, authors as distinct as the journalist and writer João do Rio and the anthropologist Nina Rodrigues documented the presence of Islamic communities in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, respectively (Costa e Silva, 2004).

The arrival of Arab peoples (19th/20th century)

The aforementioned context, coupled with the declared interest of Emperor Dom Pedro II in the so-called Orient—which led him to undertake two journeys to the Levant and Egypt between 1871 and 1876—encouraged the migration of Arab Christians from that region to Brazil. This first large influx of Arab populations into the country consisted primarily of Syrians (peoples of *Bilad al-Sham*), who arrived legally as Ottoman citizens. This status explains the collective epithet "turcos" (Turks), which was applied to them—a designation that persists to this day. However, given that most of these migrants were proud Arabs who spoke Arabic and, in some cases, may have chosen migration to escape oppression under the Sultan's rule, the label was undoubtedly unwelcome. Nonetheless, they established themselves in urban centers as shop owners and merchants, while in rural areas, they worked as itinerant salesmen (*mascates*).

The Arab immigrants from the Ottoman Empire differed significantly from the preceding waves of Arabic-speaking populations from Africa. First, they were freemen, eligible for Brazilian citizenship, and upon their arrival, they enjoyed the same legal prerogatives as other free subjects of the Empire. Second, they were Christians of various denominations, all of whom had legal status in Brazil. Although many of the early Arab immigrants viewed their journey as a temporary endeavor to accumulate wealth before returning home, others sought to establish a new life in Brazil. Finally, and no less importantly, the vast majority of these immigrants were adult men. Women and children remained in their native lands, either awaiting the return of their husbands and fathers or the call to join them in Brazil.

Regarding the formalization of Arab-Brazilian relations at the state level, Egypt was the first Arab country to establish diplomatic ties with Brazil in 1923. By that time, thousands of Arab immigrants were arriving at Brazilian ports. However, these migration waves were significantly more diverse than those of the 19th century. Not only did the arrival of entire families become more common, but the profile of migrants also varied considerably, with a growing number of Muslims choosing Brazil as their new home. This shift was particularly opportune, as Latin America experienced rapid economic growth throughout much of the 20th century and had a sustained demand for

a qualified workforce. While the United States and European countries imposed strict immigration restrictions, Brazil and its neighbors maintained relatively open policies, imposing fewer or no significant barriers to the arrival and settlement of foreign migrants.

The arrival of Arab(ic) literature (19th/20th centuries)

Alongside the movement of people, a parallel exchange of ideas began between the two regions, exemplified by the creation of Arabic literary clubs, Arabic-language press, and the development of *Al-Mahjar Al-Janubi* literature—the term used to describe Arab diasporic literature produced in Latin America. The establishment of numerous literary and cultural institutions, such as literary societies, cultural clubs, newspapers, and magazines, by Arab immigrants across the Americas, particularly in Brazil, suggests that, beyond economic and religious motivations, political factors also played a significant role in the Arab diaspora to the New World. During the 19th century, as European-born ideas of nationalism, parliamentary democracy, and freedom of speech spread to regions under Ottoman rule, they found an enthusiastic audience among the prosperous and well-educated upper and middle classes in Arab lands. Office workers, teachers, professors, journalists, and other urban intellectuals eagerly sought to benefit from the dissemination of these modernizing ideas. However, this enthusiasm was met with swift and violent repression by Ottoman authorities, who were unwilling to tolerate ideologies that could threaten their rule. Banishment and exile of nonconformists became a primary strategy employed by the Ottoman regime to maintain order (Jafarov & Ibrahimova, 2015).

North America—particularly the United States—and South America—most notably Brazil and Argentina—became preferred destinations for freedom-seeking Arab exiles. Facing harsh conditions in these new lands, they relied primarily on values such as hard work and strong familial and communal bonds. As a result, the preservation of cultural and national identity became central to the very survival of these communities. Communal and religious leaders, businessmen, teachers, and poets played a crucial role in shaping the diaspora as a meaningful and cohesive social universe for its members. Additionally, many of them took on an outward-facing role, actively engaging with educated members of the native societies. Through these interactions, they helped foster a more respectful and receptive attitude toward their fellow immigrants, contributing to the broader acceptance of Arab communities in their host countries (Jafarov & Ibrahimova, 2015).

The Arab diaspora in the Americas gave rise to a distinct literary tradition that is now recognized as an integral part of Arabic literature: Arab Mahjar literature. In Brazil, the leading figures of *Al-Mahjar al-Janubi* included Fevzi al-Maluf, Shafig al-Maluf, Riyad al-Maluf, Michel al-Maluf, Geysar al-Maluf, Rashid Selim al-Khouri, Fariz Najm, Farah Maluf, Stefan Galburni, Taufik Duoun, Jamil Safady, Jorge Safady, Wadih Safady, Nami Jafet, Taufik Kurban, Said Abu Jamra, and Miguel Nimer. These writers published books, organized literary recitals, and founded cultural societies, newspapers, and magazines. Among these societies, *Al-Usbatu-l-Andalusia*, or the Society of Andaluzia, based in São Paulo, was the most renowned (Karam, 2014; Jafarov & Ibrahimova, 2015; Pinto, 2016).

The arrival of Arab oil and money (1970s)

The oil crisis of the 1970s struck Brazil like a meteor, profoundly impacting a country that, like much of Latin America, was at the height of its industrialization process. The success of the entire Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) strategy depended on a steady supply of affordable oil from the Middle East. When oil prices skyrocketed, a heavily indebted Latin America, with limited foreign exchange reserves, had little choice but to propose barter agreements with certain Arab countries. It was during this period that Brazil and Iraq emerged as key players in a remarkably mutually beneficial history of South-South cooperation—decades before the term became a widely recognized concept. Iraqi-Brazilian relations in the 1970s and 1980s encompassed a broad spectrum of economic and strategic collaborations, including: a) The operations of the Brazilian Petroleum Corporation (Petrobras) in Iraq, where Petrobras/Braspetro discovered the Majnoon Oil Field in 1975—one of the richest oilfields in the world; b) The export of thousands of motor vehicles to Iraq, many of which can still be seen on the streets of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities; c) The reliable supply of Brazilian food products, solidifying Brazil as one of the most important food suppliers to the Arab world—a role it continues to play today; d) The development of large-scale infrastructure projects by the Brazilian company Mendes Júnior; e) The provision of materials and defense equipment to the Iraqi military by the Brazilian defense industry; f) The establishment of nuclear cooperation between the two countries.

It was also during this period that Brazil established its embassy in Jeddah, formally initiating diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, which remains Brazil's principal trading partner in the Middle East today (Brazilian Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, 2024). Within this geopolitical context, in 1975, Brazil supported a motion in the United Nations General Assembly that defined Zionism as a form of racism. This move aligns with what some scholars refer to as "oil diplomacy" (Hartshorn, 1973, p. 281), a strategic approach aimed at safeguarding Brazilian energy interests amid soaring oil prices.

The arrival of Arab heads of state (2005)

In December 2003, former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva visited the headquarters of the League of Arab States. Together with Amr Moussa, then Secretary-General of the Arab League, Lula da Silva laid the groundwork for the institutionalization of Arab-South American relations. Less than two years later, in March 2005, the First Summit of Arab-South American Countries (ASPA) was convened, facilitating various forms of cooperation between the two regions, including the Framework Agreement on Economic Cooperation between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Mercosur (Ferabolli, 2021a). The institutions established around the ASPA Summit, such as BibliAspa (Library of South America and Arab Countries), directed by Paulo Daniel Elias Farah, the Federation of Arab-South American Chambers of Commerce, and the ASPA Business Forum, aim to promote the exchange of capital, goods, people, and ideas across the Arab–South American interregional space. To date, four ASPA summits have been held: Brasília (2005), Doha (2009), Lima (2012), and Riyadh (2015).

The Arab Spring and the disintegration of the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) brought the ASPA system to a standstill. Nevertheless, interregional trade increased from just over US$ 13 billion in 2005 to nearly US$ 35 billion in 2015 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [Brazil], 2015). More recently, data compiled by the Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce revealed that trade between Brazil alone and the Arab world reached US$ 30 billion in 2023 (ANBA, 2024). As for the GCC--Mercosur Framework Agreement—one of the most highly celebrated outcomes of the ASPA Summit—negotiations have stalled. This stagnation is largely attributed to three key factors: the excessive concentration of trade relations between Saudi Arabia and Brazil, the lack of mechanisms to attract investments from Gulf sovereign wealth funds to Mercosur, and the exclusivist practice of facilitating economic engagement solely between actors linked to export and investment sectors (Ferabolli, 2021b).

The arrival of Arab studies in Brazilian academia (2000s)

Although the origins of scholarly Arab(ic) studies in Brazil can be traced back to 1951—when the University of São Paulo formalized the Arabic course previously offered informally by Jamil Sáfady in the 1940s—it was only at the turn of the 21st century that Brazilian Social Sciences made a concerted effort to understand the Middle East, particularly the Arab world. A pioneering initiative in this regard was the establishment of the Center for Middle East Studies (NEOM) in 2003 by Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto and Paul Amar, within the Graduate Program in Anthropology (PPGA) at Fluminense Federal University (UFF) in Rio de Janeiro. This was followed in 2006 by the inauguration of two disciplinary fields of inquiry—Arab History and Philosophy—within the Arabic Language, Literature, and Culture program at the University of São Paulo (USP). The establishment of the first graduate-level research group on the International Relations of the Arab World, certified by the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), took place in 2018 at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) under the coordination of Silvia Ferabolli. In 2021, the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais (PUC Minas) launched Brazil's first degree program specializing in the International Relations of the Middle East. This initiative emerged within the framework of the Middle East and Maghreb Study Group (GEOMM), founded in 2011 by Danny Zahreddine, professor in the Department of International Relations at PUC Minas and coordinator of the aforementioned program.

Another significant development in this broader movement toward a deeper engagement with the Arab world was the founding of Tabla Publishing House in 2020. Dedicated to publishing works by Middle Eastern—primarily Arab—authors, Tabla has contributed to expanding access to literature from the region within the Brazilian academic and cultural spheres.[4]Regarding broader Arab-Latin American relations, in August 2023, the First International Conference Arab Latinos! was held at the Federal University of Sergipe (UFS) in Brazil. This event marked the first open conference within a program launched in 2022 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific

4 On the study of the Middle East in Brazil see Clemesha; Ferabolli (2020).

and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), bringing together five countries: Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and Chile. According to the initiative's scientific coordinator, Geraldo Adriano Campos, "[t]his project aims to bring together, strengthen, give visibility to, and promote ties between Arab and Latin American countries, as well as civil societies in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Arab world" (UFS-BR, 2023). Finally, amid the ongoing war in Gaza and the global debate it has sparked on academic freedom, genocide, and human rights, the University of São Paulo (USP) is set to launch the Center for Palestinian Studies (CEPal) in October 2024, under the direction of Arlene Clemesha.

This account is by no means exhaustive; rather, it serves as a brief overview of the efforts within Brazilian Social Sciences to engage in knowledge production *on* and *with* the Arab world.

Conclusion

"You're not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop." This saying from the Islamic scholar Jalaluddin Mohammad Rumi (1207–1273), evokes the idea of vastness contained within a single individual. In the context of this study, it underscores the magnitude of the half-millennium-long relationship between Arabs and Brazilians—not merely a drop in the ocean of South-South relations, but a relationship that encapsulates within itself the very essence of this broader dynamic. This is precisely why we have chosen the metaphor of waves to describe the ever-evolving movements—rising and falling, advancing and retreating—that characterize the Arab presence in Brazil. It is also important to note that from the outset, Arabs and Brazilians have not primarily engaged with one another through the modern constructs of state, sovereignty, or diplomacy. Rather, their connection has been shaped by deeper and more enduring categories: culture, language, and faith. The very fact that Arabness and the Arabic language preceded the physical presence of Arab peoples on Brazilian soil—at a time when the land was not even called Brazil—serves as a reminder of the fluid and dynamic nature of Arab-Brazilian relations. As Brazil gradually constructed itself both politically and ideationally as an independent nation-state, it began receiving its first contingents of Arab immigrants. Alongside Indigenous peoples, Africans, Portuguese, Italians, Spaniards, Germans, and Japanese, Arabs became a foundational component of the imagined community that defines Brazilian national identity. Arab immigrants established social and literary circles, recreational societies, newspapers, magazines, and other institutions that enabled them to secure prominent social, political, and cultural roles within their new homeland. Not only have Arab immigrants successfully integrated into Brazilian society, but they have also played a transformative role in shaping the country's landscape. One notable example is the Syrian-Lebanese Hospital in São Paulo, one of the top two private hospitals in Brazil and among the top five in Latin America. Conceived by a group of Syrian-Lebanese women in the 1920s, the hospital became a reality through the efforts of São Paulo's large Arab community, officially opening in 1965. In the political sphere, Brazilians of Arab descent have made significant contributions at the highest levels of government. Notable figures include Simone Tebet (Minister of Planning, 2023–present), Fernando Haddad (Minister of Finance, 2023–present), Geraldo Alckmin

(Vice President of Brazil, 2023–present), Alexandre Kalil (Mayor of Belo Horizonte, 2017–2022), Paulo Maluf (Governor of São Paulo, 1979–1982), Michel Temer (President of Brazil, 2016–2018), Guilherme Boulos (Federal Deputy and candidate for Mayor of São Paulo in 2024), Gilberto Kassab (Secretary of Government and Institutional Relations of the State of São Paulo, 2023–present), and Tasso Jereissati (Governor of Ceará, 1987–1991). These are just a few among the many Brazilians of Arab descent who have played prominent roles in national politics.

A comprehensive portrayal of Arab-Brazilian relations would be incomplete without acknowledging the pivotal role of the Arab Brazilian Chamber of Commerce (CCAB) in fostering trade between Brazil and the twenty--two member states of the League of Arab States. Likewise, the contributions of scholars, writers, and translators such as Safa Jubran, Mamede Jarouche, and Michel Sleiman have been instrumental in promoting Arab literature in Brazil. However, a true depiction of these relations must also account for their more complex and contentious aspects. Funk (2024), for instance, warns that the increasing export of Brazilian (and, more broadly, Latin American) agricultural commodities to the Middle East, while enhancing food security in the Arab region, comes at the cost of various forms of political and environmental insecurity in Brazil. These include "buttressing far-right political actors, promoting the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and provoking widespread deforestation in the Amazon" (Funk, 2024, p. 28). With the recent wave of Arab-Muslim migration to Brazil, largely driven by the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the country has encountered a form of racism that was previously unfamiliar: Islamophobia. This development has prompted scholars across Brazil to critically engage with the intersection of religion and race, as well as the pressing issue of Islamophobia as a manifestation of racism. Moreover, the current Brazilian government's stance on the Gaza War—particularly President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's vocal advocacy for an immediate ceasefire and his condemnation of the genocide perpetrated by Israeli forces—has drawn intense criticism from right-wing factions within the country. These groups, which claim both political and religious ties to Israel, are the same voices that seek to suppress racial and gender minorities, undermine social movements such as the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), and obstruct the struggle of Indigenous Brazilian peoples against the destruction of their ways of life and livelihoods. Truly, the Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation is seen by many as a model to be emulated in their own struggle against the forces of oppression within Brazilian society. In this sense, we may be witnessing the emergence of a new wave of arrival—one shaped by highly politicized Arab individuals whose presence could deepen the cross-fertilization between Arab and Brazilian leftist thought and activism. Whether this vision will materialize remains to be seen. Yet, as Rumi reminds us, "Everything waits for its time."

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