

# What does “Middle East Studies” mean in Latin America? A Special Issue

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DOI: 10.5752/P.1809-6182.2024v21n2p2-7

The historical relationship between Latin America and the Middle East has deep roots, extending back to the era of European colonization in the New World (see Ferabolli and Araújo in this dossier). However, it was during the late 19th and early 20th centuries that these connections intensified, primarily due to significant waves of Arab migration to Latin America. These migrants, predominantly from the Levant region, settled in various Latin American countries, notably Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, profoundly influencing the socio-cultural fabric of these societies. They established thriving communities, contributing to commerce, culture, and the political landscape, thereby embedding Middle Eastern cultural elements into the Latin American milieu (Balloffet, 2019; Amar, 2014).

In the mid-20th century, as nations in the Mashreq and Maghreb regions achieved independence from colonial rule, the relationship between Latin America and the Middle East evolved into more structured diplomatic and economic engagements. Despite challenges posed by geographical distance, the legacy of

European colonialism, and differing political priorities, collaborative efforts emerged through international forums. The 1955 Bandung Conference marked a significant milestone, fostering South-South cooperation among developing nations. Subsequently, the Non-Aligned Movement and initiatives promoting South-South Cooperation in the 1970s further deepened ties between Latin American and Middle Eastern countries, aiming to establish a new international economic order. An illustrative example of initiatives promoting South-South Cooperation in the 1970s is the adoption of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action (BAPA) in 1978. This plan was a significant milestone in formalizing technical cooperation among developing countries, aiming to enhance collective self-reliance and establish a new international economic order. BAPA provided a framework for Latin American and Middle Eastern nations to collaborate on shared development challenges, thereby deepening their bilateral and multilateral ties. However, these engagements were often constrained by internal political dynamics within Latin American

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countries, including cycles of civil-military governance and varied strategies of international integration, as well as shifting stances toward U.S. hegemony during the Cold War (Velasco; Dahi, 2017).

Opportunities for strengthening ties emerged in the 1990s, primarily driven by commercial interests. In the early 21st century, however, these efforts became more structured, as evidenced by the launch of the South America–Arab Countries Summit (ASPA), an initiative designed to reshape economic and commercial relations on an interregional scale (see Ferabolli, 2017). This diplomatic endeavor not only reconfigured South America's engagement with the Middle East but also fostered deeper political and economic cooperation between the two regions, facilitating trade agreements, diplomatic dialogues, and multilateral initiatives. One significant diplomatic outcome of these developments was the formal recognition of the State of Palestine by several South American nations from 2010 onward.

The Arab Spring, while slowing the momentum of interregional engagement, did not bring it to a halt. The migration of Syrian citizens to Latin America introduced a new dimension to these relations, fostering deeper social and cultural exchanges<sup>3</sup>. In recent years, the political landscape of South America, sha-

ped by the rise of neoliberal and right-wing governments, has shifted its geopolitical focus northward, prioritizing a pragmatic, commercial-oriented approach to engagement with the Arab and broader Middle Eastern world.

The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored shared vulnerabilities among Latin America, the Middle East, and North Africa, particularly in managing global health challenges. Notably, collaborative efforts such as the Cuba-Iran vaccine production partnership exemplified the potential for South-South cooperation in biotechnology and public health. The outbreak of the Ukraine war in 2022 further reshaped global economic dynamics, exacerbating food supply disruptions and energy crises. Given their roles as major producers and exporters of food and energy, Latin America, the Middle East, and North Africa have gained renewed economic relevance in global markets (IFPRI, 2023; The Guardian, 2024; Reuters, 2024; Stimson, 2024; World Bank, 2023).

Beyond economic considerations, these regions are also subject to growing international expectations regarding the environmental agenda. As key stakeholders in biodiversity conservation, climate change mitigation, and the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they face increasing pressure to implement ambitious policies addressing ecological sustainability and environmental governance.

In recent times, the evolving relationships between Latin America and the Middle East have garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly in 2023, a year that has underscored the growing assertiveness of the Global South within the international order. This shift is exemplified by the expansion of BRICS, as the bloc seeks to broaden its institutional scope by integrating additional nations. The inclusion of Saudi Arabia

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<sup>3</sup> Two doctoral theses have been produced on this subject by doctoral students supervised by contributors to this special issue. **Danny Zahreddine** supervised the thesis *A Coesão Social na Síria: Um estudo da percepção dos refugiados sírios no Brasil sobre a relação entre os grupos confessionais na Síria entre 1990 a 2010*, written by **Guilherme di Lorenzo Pires**, within the Graduate Program in International Relations at PUC Minas Gerais. Similarly, **Silvia Ferabolli** supervised the thesis *A Síria a partir do Brasil: uma análise de percepção dos sírios sobre a situação no seu país de origem*, written by **Gabriela Silva**, within the Graduate Program in International Strategic Studies at UFRGS.

(currently under discussion) and Ethiopia, along with Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, reflects this evolving dynamic (Carnegie, 2024). Amidst the Gaza conflict, Latin American countries have pursued distinct diplomatic and political initiatives, reinforcing the significance of the Palestinian question. Brazil, assuming a central role, advocated for a neutral and pacifying approach, calling for an immediate ceasefire and the establishment of humanitarian corridors in Gaza. In contrast, Bolivia and Chile took more assertive stances by severing diplomatic ties with Israel while the conflict persisted (Real Institute Elcano, 2023). Additionally, Latin America's role in global energy governance has expanded, as demonstrated by Brazil's potential entry into OPEC+, Venezuela's established membership in OPEC, and Mexico's participation in OPEC+. These developments highlight how Latin American nations are emerging as influential actors in international energy politics, actively reshaping their traditional energy policies within a shifting global landscape.

Building on the extensive social, political, and economic relationships between Latin America and the Middle East, a fundamental question arises: "What does 'Middle East Studies' mean in Latin America?" While this may initially appear to be a bold inquiry, it should be understood metaphorically—as an invitation to explore how Latin American scholars conceptualize, interpret, and engage with the Middle East through distinct regional lenses. This question serves as the intellectual foundation of this Special Issue, which seeks to offer insight into the diverse methodological, theoretical, and empirical approaches that define Latin American research on the Middle East.

This initiative, however, does not represent an inaugural effort but rather an outcome

of the ongoing process of systematizing Latin American research on the Middle East within established epistemic spaces. In our case, this endeavor materialized through the formation of a research network that brings together Latin American scholars dedicated to the study of the Middle East, with particular emphasis on its interconnections with our region. Since 2016, the Working Group: Middle East and North Africa of CLACSO (*Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales*), an international non-governmental institution with associative status at UNESCO since its founding in 1967, has sought to coordinate and consolidate the efforts of Latin American scholars engaged in the political, economic, and socio-cultural study of the MENA region. More broadly, the Working Group aims to enhance Latin American societies' understanding of the Middle East while fostering the development of research initiatives that explore the historical, political, and cultural interrelations between both regions.

Drawing on the collective experience of this research network, we proposed a Special Section at the BRISMES Conference 2023, entitled "*Seeing the Middle East from Faces Beyond the Metropole<sup>4</sup>: What Does Middle East Studies Mean in Latin America?*" An internal selection process was conducted among the approximately 80 current members of CLACSO's MENA Working Group, aligning with its thematic divisions: Middle Eastern Diasporas in Latin America; Religion, Culture, and the Study of Islam in Latin America; and Latin America–MENA International Relations. This initiative was led by Silvia Ferabolli (Federal

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<sup>4</sup> We gratefully acknowledge that this **evocative and insightful** phrase was originally conceived by **Sharri-Plonsky** during our inaugural discussion on the creation of this **Special Section**.

University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil) and Rodrigo Amaral (Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil), with the valuable support of Sharri Plonsky (Queen Mary University of London) and Neve Gordon (BRISMES). It aimed to foster academic engagement by introducing the BRISMES community to the research contributions of Latin American scholars in Middle Eastern studies and offering a representative sample of the diverse and evolving scholarship emerging from the region. This endeavor was intended to constitute an initial step toward the development of a collaborative academic network linking universities across Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East, with the objective of fostering enduring scholarly dialogue and sustained intellectual and institutional cooperation.

Building on the outcomes of these presentations, we proposed a Special Issue in *Conjuntura Internacional*, the International Relations journal of PUC Minas, featuring articles developed from the research presented by scholars who participated in the Special Section “*What Does Middle East Studies Mean in Latin America?*” at the 2023 BRISMES Conference. This Special Issue consists of eight articles, structured into two sections.

The first section comprises articles that examine the politics, history, and culture of Arab-Latin American relations, adopting a broad analytical framework to explore Latin American perceptions of key Middle Eastern themes. In “Arabs in Brazil: An Overview of Half a Millennium of Relations,” Silvia Ferafolli and Luiz Antônio Araújo provide a historical analysis of Arab-Brazilian relations, offering a foundational entry point for scholars new to the field. The study delineates six distinct phases of Arab and Muslim migration

to Brazil, spanning from the 16th century to the present, and underscores key historical moments and sociopolitical transformations that have shaped this enduring transregional relationship. In “Global South by the Global South? Latin American IR Reads the Middle East,” Mariela Cuadro critically interrogates how Latin American IR scholarship constructs knowledge about the Middle East, emphasizing the colonial power-knowledge dynamics that shape both regions and their positioning within global hierarchies. Finally, in “Mahjar Studies in Latin America: Evolution, Theoretical Advances, and Emerging International Relations Perspectives”, Jorge Araneda offers a comprehensive review of Mahjar studies in Latin America, tracing the field’s evolution from its historical foundations to its contemporary engagement with MENA–Latin American relations within IR scholarship.

The second set of articles consists of case studies that engage with the three previously outlined axes of CLACSO’s MENA Working Group, i.e., Middle Eastern Diasporas in Latin America; Religion, Culture, and the Study of Islam in Latin America; and Latin America–MENA International Relations. Each study examines a specific social, political, or economic phenomenon geographically situated in Latin America that incorporates a Middle Eastern dimension. In “Urban Trajectories and political experiences of Migrants in São Paulo: The Case of “Al Janiah” Workers, a Cultural and Gastronomic Space in the City”, Reginaldo Nasser, Rodrigo Amaral, Tiago Cortes, and Marina Mattar investigate the urban trajectories of migrants and refugees from diverse national backgrounds within Al Janiah, a Palestinian cultural and gastronomic space in São Paulo. The study finds that Al Janiah serves

as a critical site of city-making, fostering social integration beyond conventional migrant networks and providing valuable insights into the lived experiences and adaptation processes of displaced populations in São Paulo. In “The State of Israel in the Construction of Argentine Politics through a Prophetic Lens,” Damián Setton examines how the right-wing Argentine government frames the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with a particular focus on the use of religious symbols in constructing Javier Milei’s public image and the Libertarian identity project. The analysis explores the integration of Jewish symbols into Milei’s political rhetoric, shedding light on their role in shaping Argentina’s contemporary political landscape. In “The Rise and Fall of Brazil and Israel’s Sub-Imperialism,” Bruno Huberman critically engages with Ruy Mauro Marini’s concept of sub-imperialism, using Brazil and Israel as case studies during and after the Cold War. The article examines whether these nations continue to exhibit sub-imperialist tendencies in the post-Cold War era, considering shifts in U.S. imperialism and the evolving geopolitical roles of Brazil in South America and Israel in the MENA region. In “Islam in Mexico: Love and Mobility,” Arely Medina, Alejandra Sotomayor, and Samantha Levy undertake an anthropological analysis of Muslim communities in Mexico, with a specific focus on the role of marriage within these communities. The study explores how Islamic matrimonial practices navigate religious mandates while intersecting with broader global dynamics, including migration, political conditions, and economic shifts in Muslim-majority countries. In “Social Trust and Intercommunal Relations in Pre-Crisis Syria: Reflections from Syrian Refugees in Brazil,” Danny Zahreddine and Guilherme Lorenzo investigate the role

of social trust among religious communities in Syria since the 1990s, drawing on findings from a 2019 study involving Syrian refugees in Brazil. The article explores refugees’ perceptions and experiences, offering insights into interfaith relations, trust dynamics, and their implications for the broader Syrian conflict.

Finally, we acknowledge that it would be impossible to provide a singular, definitive answer to the question of “*What Does Middle East Studies Mean in Latin America?*” Instead, this Special Issue offers a curated sample of the rich and diverse body of research produced by scholars engaging with this subject. While it does not claim to comprehensively map the entire field, it highlights key trajectories, debates, and empirical inquiries that underscore the growing importance of interregional studies between Latin America and the Middle East. More than merely presenting a snapshot of ongoing research, this collection serves as both an invitation and an encouragement to continue deepening the exploration of the multifaceted interactions between these two spaces of the Global South.

At the same time, we urge our readers to approach this Special Issue with an understanding of the linguistic diversity that characterizes the production of knowledge in a truly global discipline. Many of the contributing authors are English as a Second Language (ESL) scholars, and while their prose may not always conform to the stylistic standards of native English speakers, their intellectual contributions remain rigorous, insightful, and essential. In a field such as International Relations (IR), which aspires to be global, it is both unreasonable and counterproductive to expect all academic work to be articulated in “Shakespearean” English. To impose such a standard would be to privilege

form over substance and, worse, to perpetuate epistemic hierarchies that systematically disadvantage scholars from the Global South.

As Gilberto Freyre (2011, p. 146) reminds us, the affinities that bind Latin America, with its tropical, Latin, and Amerindian heritage, to regions such as Egypt, Arabia, and India run deep—they are not superficial. The same can be said of the intellectual exchanges between these regions: they transcend language barriers and stylistic conventions, offering perspectives that challenge, enrich, and ultimately decolonize the field of IR. We invite our readers, therefore, to engage with the substance of these contributions, recognizing that the true value of scholarship lies not in linguistic perfection, but in its ability to provoke thought, foster dialogue, and expand the horizons of global knowledge production.

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