

# BRAZIL AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Reflections on Lula's South–South Cooperation

*By Celso Amorim*

**A**fter President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's eight years in office, Brazil has reached a new status in international relations, a fact recognized by defenders and critics alike. In an article about Turkey, the British magazine the *Economist* (which was often critical of Brazil's positions and initiatives in subjects ranging from the Free Trade Area of the Americas to the Iranian nuclear program) referred to Brazil as a "diplomatic giant."

This is just one example. Brazil has made her presence felt in most international negotiations, from finance to trade, from climate to disarmament. Brazil is a member of several groups that have a crucial role in world governance, such as the G-20, BRICS and BASIC. Brazil's role in trade negotiations has been amply recognized, even by those who might regret it.

Much of this results from profound changes Brazil has undergone—such as the consolidation of the democratic process, sound economic performance, and the promotion of social justice—as much as from President Lula's charismatic personality. But part of this success can be credited to a 'bold and activist' foreign policy, as befits the country's dimensions and potential. From South America to Africa, from 'global dialogue' with the U.S. to a 'strategic partnership' with the European Union, Brazil's diplomatic activity in the last part of the first decade of the twenty-first century has been intense and, as a French scholar interviewed by *Le Monde* put it recently, "imaginative."

▷ **Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Tehran, May 17, 2010.**  
*Abedin Taherkenareh/EPA/Corbis*

Fostering relations with the developing world was one of the cornerstones of President Lula's foreign policy. Renewed dialogue and cooperation with countries of the Middle East was part of this larger effort to strengthen South–South cooperation. Without any hesitation, I can testify that the Middle East was



brought, perhaps for the first time, to the center of our diplomatic radar. This might seem strange for a country that participated in two world wars and even sent troops to Suez, under the UN flag; but throughout most of her history, Brazil has maintained good and cordial though somewhat distant relations with the countries of the Middle East.

During President Lula's two mandates, Brazilian foreign policy made a genuine effort to engage countries of the Middle East on the bilateral and bi-regional (involving South America as a whole) levels. Brazil's interests in coming closer to the Middle East are quite distinct from those of the traditional Western powers. We do not depend on the Middle East for oil. Although we fully grasp the centrality of the region for world peace, Brazil has no major direct national security concern at stake there. We are not a large arms exporter to the region. And of course, unlike other countries, we do not carry any colonial or Cold War baggage in the Middle East (or anywhere else, for that matter).

Brazil and the countries of the Arab world share strong human bonds. Notable Arab influence can be found in Brazilian culture and society. This may be seen in literature, cuisine, and in the names of some of our most prominent politicians and businessmen. There are around ten to twelve million Brazilians of Arab descent. The largest populations of Lebanese and Syrian origin outside those countries reside in Brazil. Last year, we celebrated the 130th anniversary of Arab immigration. Brazil is also the home to a very dynamic Jewish community. Arab and Jewish communities are fully integrated into our society—and they live harmoniously side by side. Tolerance, acceptance of differences, and respect for the other, over and above distinctions of race or creed, are fundamental values that Brazil holds both domestically and internationally. By pursuing closer relations with the Middle Eastern countries, Brazil is rediscovering her own identity.

The deepening of relations between Brazil and countries of the Middle East was long overdue. It is surprising—if not alarming—that President Lula was the first Brazilian head of state ever to visit the Middle East officially. (Before him, Emperor Dom Pedro II made a trip to parts of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century, but his was a cultural and religious expedition for personal enlightenment.) During his eight years in office, President Lula went to Syria, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Algeria, Qatar (two times, one of which was to attend the second Arab–South American Summit), Libya (also twice, including once as a special guest of the African Union summit), Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Palestine, and Iran. He also made a state visit to Israel.

Brazil was the first country in Latin America and the Caribbean to be granted observer status by the Arab League. President Lula's first address to the Arab League was a groundbreaking event. I myself went to Cairo and Algiers to attend a summit and a ministerial meeting of the Arab League. In my capacity as foreign minister I paid dozens of visits to Middle Eastern countries. In one of those trips, in preparation

for a summit between South American and Arab countries, I visited ten countries in ten days, which made me feel like a modern version of the great fourteenth-century traveler and writer from Tangiers, Ibn Battuta.

This renewed interest was reciprocated: countries of the Middle East have also given clear indications that they seek better ties with Brazil. The then Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa visited Brasília three times during the Lula presidency. In the past eight years, Brazil hosted fourteen heads of state and government from countries in the Middle East. In November 2009 alone, the presidents of Israel, Palestine, and Iran visited Brazil within a period of ten days. Playing host to the leaders of these three countries within a fortnight is a testament to the credibility Brasília has acquired over the last few years with a great variety of interlocutors.

### Diplomacy and Trade

Closer relations have been translated into concrete diplomatic overtures. Brazilian diplomatic missions were opened in the Middle East: embassies in Muscat and Doha; an office in Ramallah (soon to become an embassy); and a consulate-general in Beirut. The Brazilian embassy in Baghdad will reopen soon (it has been functioning in Amman, Jordan, since the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq). A post of ambassador at large for the Middle East was also created, following a suggestion that the then foreign minister of the Palestinian Authority, Nabil Shaath, made directly to President Lula and myself during our visit to Cairo in December 2003. On that occasion, for the sole purpose of meeting President Lula, Nabil Shaath had to travel for more than eight hours from Ramallah to Cairo, crossing innumerable barriers on his way.

The most important initiative on the diplomatic level was the establishment of the South American–Arab Countries Summit (ASPA, as we call it, following the Brazilian and Spanish acronyms), a mechanism meant to strengthen the ties between the two regions. The idea of the summit was born early in President Lula's first term. I explored it in my first visits to the region, following a World Trade Organization ministerial meeting in Sharm El-Sheik and a World Economic Forum regional meeting at the Dead Sea, as early as May 2003. In June I sent my chief of staff as a special envoy to the region. He took with him letters from President Lula to several Arab leaders, including President Yasser Arafat, then under virtual siege in the Mokata, the presidential compound in Ramallah. After laborious, but in the end gratifying efforts, which included some ministerial meetings and numerous encounters with high officials, Brazil was able to host, in May 2005, the first South America–Arab Countries Summit. A second ASPA summit was organized in Doha, Qatar, in 2009. The third summit should have taken place in Lima, Peru, in the early part of 2011, but events in the Middle East forced its postponement.

One anecdote well illustrates the change in the traditional mindset that such an initiative concerning a bi-regional meeting of leaders implied. In one of my early travels to the region, one journalist, who was actually sympathetic to our efforts, did not hide her (or her bosses') skepticism. She confronted me with the question why Brazil had made that move, which seemed at a first glance so alien to 'business as usual.' I tried to answer that question as best as I could, pointing out the historical bonds and the potential for economic cooperation, the cultural and political benefits, etc. The reporter did not seem fully convinced, but duly recorded my explanation in her piece for an important Arab newspaper. A couple of years later, in the course of a preparatory meeting in Marrakesh, Morocco, the same journalist asked me: "Why didn't this summit take place before?"

With the advent of ASPA, these two parts of the developing world were brought together for the first time to discuss political issues of mutual interest and further enhance trade, investment, tourism, as well as technical, scientific, and cultural cooperation. At the margins of the ASPA summits, meetings of business people were held. Commerce between South America and Arab countries increased sharply. This would surprise many of our media analysts and self-anointed pundits, who saw the initiative in a purely ideological light and affirmed that it would not bring any concrete (i.e. economic) results.

Several countries from South America and the Arab world, which had scarce contacts before ASPA, have now engaged in full diplomatic relations. Visits have multiplied. And this has happened not only in relation to big countries like Brazil and Argentina, but also to smaller ones like Uruguay and Paraguay. Above all, this new mechanism facilitated dialogue between regions until then distant from each other. A better first-hand understanding by South American countries of the questions that confront the Middle East was made possible. Thus, when toward the end of Lula's groundbreaking presidency, Brazil decided to recognize the state of Palestine, this gesture—made in view of the stalled peace process and the Israeli government's refusal to renew the freezing of settlements in the Palestinian occupied territories—was quickly followed by similar actions on the part of our neighbors.

As stated earlier, the positive effects of ASPA were also to be seen in the fields of trade and investment. Businessmen are very attentive to the signals conveyed by governments. Often leaders wave the flag and businessmen follow suit. Apart from the business meetings, held in parallel to both summits, several trade missions took place, as part of state visits or independently from them. New flights have been established (between São Paulo and Dubai, Tel Aviv, and Doha). Trade between South American and Arab countries has increased from \$10 billion in 2004 (the year before the first summit) to around \$30 billion recently. Trade between Brazil and the Arab countries has also significantly increased since 2003: from \$5.5 billion in the first year of President Lula's tenure, our trade flows reached \$20.3 billion in 2008, soaring fourfold in such a short time. After falling in 2009

due to the effects of the international economic crisis, in 2010 exchanges almost matched the historical peak of 2008. Just before the recent political turmoil, Arab countries, taken as a single region, were responsible for Brazil's largest trade surplus in the world.

A free trade agreement (FTA) was signed some months ago between Egypt and Mercosul (the customs union that brings together Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, hopefully to be joined in the very near future by Venezuela). Framework agreements with Syria, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine, and the Gulf Cooperation Council are already in place. Negotiations are at an advanced stage for new FTAs with the GCC and Jordan. It is worth noting that an FTA had already been signed with Israel, a signal of our region's pluralistic standing. In the implementation of the agreement with Israel due care is being taken not to allow products originating in the occupied territories to benefit from the liberalization envisaged in the accord.

### **Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon**

The increased contacts between Brazil and the countries of the Middle East have helped forge a partnership based on mutual confidence and respect. Brazil's views on Middle East matters are increasingly sought after; our ability to talk to all sides and exert constructive influence is very much appreciated. This is not only my personal evaluation. It is an opinion expressed both privately and publicly by leading figures of several countries in the region. Our firm yet balanced attitudes in the United Nations Security Council regarding issues like Iraq, Lebanon, and more recently Iran and Libya, contribute to make it clear that Brazil acts independently, in accordance with her own judgment, and is not influenced by preconceived ideas. Nor does she easily bend to pressures from big powers, including the biggest of them all.

This helps explain why Brazil was one of the few non-Islamic developing countries from outside the Middle East to be invited to the Annapolis Conference in 2007 and to the Conference in Support of the Palestinian Economy for the Reconstruction of Gaza, in Sharm El-Sheikh in 2009. In the case of Annapolis, it is also worth noting that the other two countries in a similar category were India and South Africa, which, together with Brazil, form the IBSA Forum, another initiative taken under President Lula. IBSA became so relevant in the discussion of Middle Eastern affairs that the Palestinian foreign minister, Riad Malki, traveled halfway across the globe to participate in a breakfast with his counterparts from the three countries, in the margins of a BRICS/IBSA Summit in Brasília, in April 2010 (by the way, a historic day for the shaping of a multipolar world order). Some months later, the Foreign Minister of Indonesia called for a meeting with the IBSA countries plus Palestine in the context of the UN General Assembly.

I have traveled five times to Israel and Palestine since 2005. My first trip to Ramallah was part of the preparations for the ASPA process. But my contacts with President

Mahmoud Abbas, with the then Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei, and with my official counterpart allowed me to have a deeper view of the grim situation the Palestinian people were going through, as did also my car journey from the Jordan–Palestine crossing point at the Allenby Bridge and back. It is hard to describe the strong impression caused by the numerous road blocks and detours to which Palestinian nationals are subject, in contrast with the highly protected Israeli motorway running over their territory, which they are barred from using. President Abbas, together with Amr Moussa at the Arab League, was one of the strongest supporters of the process we had launched.

In my travels in the region, I did not skip Israel either. Soon after ASPA, I visited Jerusalem for conversations with the then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert, then deputy prime minister, as well as with my official counterpart, Sylvan Shalom. Keeping this balance was important so that Brazil would not disqualify as an interlocutor for both sides, while not renouncing any of her principled positions. I returned several times to the West Bank and to Israel, including, most notably, during the Gaza conflict in January 2009. On that occasion, I delivered, through Jordan, a donation of food and medical supplies from Brazil to the people of Gaza. Talking quite frankly and in a friendly way with Tzipi Livni, the Israeli foreign minister at the time, I joined Brazil's voice to the many around the world, who were condemning the invasion of Gaza and appealing for a prompt cessation of hostilities. President Lula himself visited the region in March 2010, conveying our message of peace and conciliation, as well as our firm support for the just cause of the Palestinian people.

In contacts with the Israeli government as well as with the Palestinian Authority, Brazil has systematically stressed her support for an economically viable Palestinian state within the borders of 1967, having Jerusalem as its capital. Brazil also supports the right of Israel to live securely and in peace with her neighbors. In all our statements, we have stressed the central importance of stopping all settlement activity by Israel in the Palestinian territory, including in East Jerusalem. Brazil has also advocated the end of the blockade of Gaza. And of course we have condemned the resort to any kind of violence, including all forms of terrorism, which we consider a blind alley. In constant conversations, during President Lula's term, with Palestinian officials as well as leaders in the Arab world, Brazil has pleaded for reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas as a necessary condition for achieving peace with Israel. I am glad to see that in April an understanding was reached by the leaders of these two main political factions. I sincerely hope that all those concerned understand that a durable peace can only be obtained with the concurrence of both parties. It is also my hope that, in this process, Hamas will come to terms with the historical fact of the existence of Israel and therefore accept the two-state solution.

In the last few years, Brazil has been defending the inclusion of new actors in the peace negotiations. We are glad to see that this view has been embraced by more and

more people in the region. The Annapolis process was a good start in that direction. Unfortunately it was short lived. We are convinced that enlarging the conversations to a broader group will allow the appearance of fresh ideas. In one way, the peace process so far has suffered from a kind of claustrophobia, without room for new solutions. Of course it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel. The main elements of a peace accord have long been on the table. But new actors can surely contribute some lateral thinking on ways of implementing them. So far, apart from the countries directly involved in the conflict, the Middle East issue has been dealt with exclusively by the United States and, on a very secondary level, by the members of the Quartet (the U.S., Russia, the European Union and the UN). A breath of fresh air would certainly do no harm.

Gathering interested countries with a conciliatory profile, international credibility, and good relations with all parties can provide the basis for a small support group for the Quartet, which could help advance individual dossiers in the negotiation between Israel and Palestine. It is my contention that the IBSA countries, Brazil first and foremost, could give a helping hand in creating an atmosphere conducive to a workable understanding, and even come up with one or two ideas of their own. The idea of a support group acting together with a core group is not new in facilitating peace agreements: it was put in practice, for instance, in the Central American conflicts of the 1980s.

No single actor can do more to strengthen moderate positions on the part of the Palestinian leadership than Israel. Should there be no clear prospect of a viable Palestinian state, radical groups will impose themselves. Even more dangerous, their ideas will become the prevailing ones. As I said at the Annapolis conference, there will be no peace without painful concessions on both sides.

In parallel to political efforts to promote a just and lasting peace, Brazil has been supporting Palestinian development. In 2007 Brazil made a donation worth \$10 million, which is being invested in education, public health, and urban infrastructure in the West Bank. Brazil pledged another \$15 million at the Sharm El-Sheikh conference on Gaza reconstruction. Together with India and South Africa, our partners in the IBSA Forum, we funded the construction of a sporting facility in Ramallah. The same three countries are also funding the reconstruction of a hospital in Gaza, the initiation of which was stopped by the blockade imposed on that territory by the Israeli authorities. In my last visit as foreign minister to Israel I raised the subject with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who did not seem totally closed to the possibility of reexamining the situation, although, as far as I know, nothing concrete has happened since then.

The recent Brazilian recognition of the Palestinian state was a natural step, given our willingness to contribute to a just and lasting solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the letter he sent to President Abbas to formalize such recognition,

President Lula underlined that the Brazilian decision did not imply abandoning our strong conviction that negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians are indispensable to achieve the concessions needed from both sides. Following Brazil's decision, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Chile also announced their formal recognition of Palestine. Some European countries said they were reexamining the case.

When he came to attend President Dilma Rousseff's inauguration in January, President Abbas symbolically launched the construction of the Palestinian embassy in Brasilia. The recognition of Palestine reinforces our historical commitment to the creation of an economically viable and geographically cohesive Palestinian state, coexisting peacefully and securely with the state of Israel. We see it as a stimulus—and not a substitute—to the negotiations.

It is of course too early to tell whether the unfolding events in several Arab countries, which have mesmerized the world, will create the conditions for the resumption of the Palestinian–Israeli peace process. Needless to say, much will depend on the reactions of Israel and the United States. So far these have not been encouraging. But we should not despair. It takes time and patient persuasion to adapt one's long-held views to new realities.

It has also been our conviction that the Syrian government—quite apart from the dramatic events that are taking place in that country, which, one hopes, will soon give way to an authentically democratic process—must be increasingly involved in peace initiatives across the region. Syria has a strong stake in peace. In my conversations with President Bashar Al-Assad—and I am sure this will hold true of any government that emerges from the current troubles—I got the impression that Syria was willing to play her part, provided her own perspectives and interests are taken into due consideration. Once present developments unfold themselves, Syria will once again become a fundamental player in the efforts toward peaceful solutions in Lebanon, Palestine, and, to some degree, Iraq. The importance of Syria may seem less obvious and even a bit far-fetched now, but will become clear as the situation normalizes, hopefully sooner rather than later. In my talks with U.S., Israeli, and European colleagues, I always urged them to bring Syria back to the table.

Mindful of Syria's role in the region, President Lula visited Damascus in his first year in office. President Al-Assad reciprocated the visit in July 2010, in his first-ever transatlantic trip. I visited Damascus on six different occasions, almost all of them immediately before or after visiting Israel. This strong dialogue with Syrian and Israeli governments gave Brazil the credentials to play a confidence-building role with regard to negotiations in sensitive issues such as the Golan Heights. The electoral process in Brazil and subsequent events in the area, especially in Syria itself, did not allow this facilitation to realize its potential.

On a previous occasion, I had already brought a message from the president of Syria to the prime minister of Israel, at the time Ehud Olmert. That was just after Annapolis, and somehow preceded the ‘proximity talks’ mediated by Turkey. The Syrian president once told me that Damascus was ready to initiate such talks, provided they did not go back to square one, meaning that they should take into consideration progress achieved in previous rounds. The feedback I had from the Israeli prime minister was positive. And indeed a couple of months later the ‘proximity talks’ started. Of course, I do not claim that this happened by virtue of our action. I am sure many other interlocutors were involved in that *démarche*. Unfortunately, the talks were interrupted by the Israeli military action in Gaza and rendered more difficult by the 2010 Flotilla of Freedom affair, in which activists, who were trying to break the Gaza siege, were killed by Israeli forces. More recently, following President Lula’s visit to the region (which did not include Syria this time), Brazil’s good offices were again requested in order to help jump-start dialogue between Israel and Syria.

Brazilians are also very attached to the Lebanese. That has a lot to do with the people-to-people dimension of our relations. One of President Lula’s early visits was to Beirut, also in 2003. Lebanese political stability affects Brazil directly, not only because of the large Lebanese community in Brazil, but also due to the increasing number of Brazilian nationals living in Lebanon. During the 2006 war, for example, the Brazilian government organized the evacuation of three thousand of her citizens—and some citizens of other countries as well. That was the largest operation of its kind ever carried out by Brazil. While the rescue operation was taking place, I twice visited the city of Adana, in southern Turkey, where most of the Brazilians who fled the Israeli bombings sought refuge before being evacuated to Brazil (though, to be sure, quite a sizable number went to Damascus, which was closer for those living in the Bekaa Valley).

During one such visit, a lady, probably in her late fifties or early sixties, came to thank me with great emotion: “This is the third time I have had to flee a war, but it is the first time the Brazilian government has come to my assistance.” This only confirmed the truth of a thought that occurred to me long before, which I often repeated to my students at Instituto Rio Branco, the Brazilian diplomatic academy: “You (meaning actually anyone) may not take an interest in international politics, but sooner or later international politics—as indeed any politics—will take an interest in you. And you had better prepare yourself for that moment.”

I visited Beirut the day following the ceasefire. Apart from the shocking scenes of smouldering buildings and vast destruction (a great deal of which was caused by bombings after the ceasefire was declared), I was particularly moved by the sight, amid the rubble, of a Brazilian national team jersey—a visual reminder of how close Brazilian people were to those who were suffering from the devastation.

As a result of that tragedy, we became even closer to Lebanon. Although I am no longer in government, I am deeply convinced that Brazil will continue to be engaged, promoting peace and dialogue, supporting every initiative that brings stability and progress to the Lebanese people—and, as a consequence, to neighboring countries. After the 2006 war, Brazil donated funds for reconstruction and assisted the Lebanese government through cooperation projects. The visit to Brazil of President Michel Suleiman, in April 2010, reinforced this partnership. Following requests and suggestions by several of our partners in the region, including the Lebanese themselves, Brazil has recently taken on the leadership of the naval component of UNIFIL, the UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon. This again amounts to some sort of recognition by those more directly involved that Brazil can play a constructive role in promoting peace in the region.

### **From Brasilia to Tehran**

One of our initiatives in the wider Middle East involved the efforts to promote a diplomatic solution to a seemingly intractable issue: the Iranian nuclear program. The Tehran Declaration of May 17, 2010 has a lot to do not only with Brazilian foreign policy toward the Middle East, but also with the promotion of international peace and security. Along with Turkey, Brazil engaged Iran in negotiations related to the vexed question of that country's nuclear program. Why did Brazil do so?

Brazil got interested in this question for a number of reasons, which are worth explaining. First, as one of the countries that—together with Japan—has been most often in the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member, Brazil has been confronted with the need to give her opinion (and indeed her vote) on critical issues for international peace and security. More than once, Brazil has contributed her skills and imagination—apart from her strong belief in the power of dialogue in attempts to find solutions to difficult questions.

When Brazil served on the Security Council between 1998 and 1999, I was personally involved in the effort to prevent the Iraq situation from deteriorating to the point it actually did later on, in a different context (somehow linked, in fact or fiction, to the 'war on terror'). The three panels Brazil chaired on different aspects of the Iraq question (disarmament, the humanitarian situation, and Kuwaiti prisoners of war and stolen property) presented conclusions that helped avoid or at least postpone the aggravation of the situation. Many of the recommendations of the disarmament panel—certainly the most difficult of the three—were incorporated in the resolution that extinguished UNSCOM and created UNMOVIC, with a somewhat modified mandate. This replacement of a commission whose activities had been marked by controversy with a new body and a new chairman might, in different circumstances, have led to a more positive outcome.

Moreover, Brazil has been an active participant in the Conference on Disarmament—which I had the honor to chair twice, in 1993 and 1999—and a founding member of the New Agenda Coalition, a group of countries united by the common goal of total elimination of nuclear weapons. Disarmament and nonproliferation issues were not off our radar screen. For decades, Brazil played an important role in the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), mainly as a strong supporter of the right of nations to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. As is well known, Brazil has her own program of uranium enrichment for the production of electricity, as well as a means of naval propulsion. All these facts contributed to the existence of personal and professional links with some of the people who were more directly involved in the discussions on the Iranian question. Besides, having always kept normal diplomatic relations with Tehran, Brazil was also able to listen to the Iranian side of the story. In this connection, not only in Vienna, but also in the two capitals, a dialogue of some sort predated the more recent efforts and initiatives.

Brazil was also interested in developing her economic and commercial ties with a country roughly the same size as Turkey and Egypt, and bigger than any other country in our own region, with the exception of Mexico and Brazil herself. Iran is a very attractive market for our exports and a potential recipient of Brazilian investments in the fields of energy, mining, and transportation material.

In our very diverse conversations with several Middle East countries, it became clear that any attempt to build a long-lasting peace in the region would involve, sooner or later, some form of dialogue with Iran. The prospect of coming back to the Security Council for the biennium 2010–2011 helped sharpen our focus. The Iranian nuclear program had been the subject of talks I held in past years with some of my colleagues as well as with high-placed international officials.

In these conversations, I had always felt that there was a missing element in the proposals made to Iran, either directly by Western powers, or by the intermediary of the IAEA. This missing link, which to my mind was essential to convince Iran to cooperate more fully with the IAEA, was the recognition—in practice, rather than in theory—of Iran's right to develop her own peaceful nuclear program, including her capacity to enrich uranium. Of course, I took due note of the fact that Iran had not complied fully with her international obligations in regard to declaring her nuclear activities, and possibly other aspects as well—and that the country was, therefore, in debt to the international community. But in the same way as someone who has defaulted on payments to a credit agency may have his or her card suspended, but eventually have it restored after some conditions are met and some time has elapsed, Iran should not be stripped forever (or rather, for the foreseeable future, which in politics amounts to the same thing) of the rights ensured to all members of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In other words, just as one

should not be deprived of access to credit because of religion or race—or even because one lives in a ‘bad neighborhood’ (the analogy holds)—a country cannot be deprived of access to a technology because it is Muslim or is situated in a dangerous region, especially if one of its neighbors is known to possess not only the same technology, but the actual weapons.

The proposal presented in October 2009 to Iran by the U.S., France, and Russia, and supported by the IAEA, involved a swap of Iranian low-enriched uranium for nuclear fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR). It had incentives for both sides—Iran would send abroad 1,200 kilograms of her low-enriched uranium, a move that interested those who feared Iran’s intentions in enriching uranium. On the other hand, the proposed swap agreement did not question the Iranian right to enrichment, a topic that made all previous proposals non-starters for the Iranians. In other words, the agreement was specifically built and advertised by its proponents as a confidence-building measure.

The negotiations with Iran were led by the P-5+1—the permanent members of the Security Council (U.S., UK, France, Russia, and China) plus Germany. Brazil decided to take an active role in this particular initiative because we are committed to international peace, because Brazil is one of the few countries with the credibility to sustain an open dialogue with all the parties involved and therefore has an obligation to help, and finally because we had been urged by several leaders to talk to the Iranian regime and try to convince it to accept the proposal and to adopt a more flexible approach in regard to its nuclear program. In engaging Iran in negotiations on the fuel swap, Brazil and Turkey were simply putting forward ideas that were promoted by other countries who had been sitting at the table.

Those interested in the deal were the first to underline the potential attraction it had for Iran, since it was based on the *de facto*—if not *de jure*—recognition of her capacity to enrich uranium. At least once, one of my interlocutors (in this case not a minister, but a highly placed official) even suggested that, if the deal went through, the relevant Security Council resolutions might have to be adjusted to the new reality.

Based on such considerations and with explicit encouragement from some of the leaders of the P-5+1—who might have bet that, in a later stage, we would eventually fail—Brazil joined forces with Turkey (a NATO member and a country close enough to Iran to be concerned with the possible military implications of the Iranian nuclear program) to seek ways and means to make such a deal possible. Faced with initial Iranian resistance to accepting specific conditions, some variations around the original proposals were explored; but in the end, both Brazil and Turkey insisted that Iran should accept the three essential elements of the proposal, which related to the quantity of low-enriched uranium to be transferred, the timing of such a transfer, and the place where the exchange should take place. On all three of these totally verifiable elements (how much, when, and where), Iran ended up conceding.

Thus, in the course of negotiations, which extended for eighteen hours on May 16 and followed months of intense consultations, Iran made voluntary concessions regarding three central points that she had been resisting before Brazil and Turkey joined the talks. It is fair to ask why Brazil and Turkey succeeded where the major powers had consistently failed. Probably the main reason consists in the fact that Brazil and Turkey have good relations with Iran. We talk to her government with respect and understanding. Second, Brazil and Turkey are non-nuclear states, thus enjoying far greater legitimacy in negotiating issues related to Iran's nuclear file. Third, the two countries did not prejudice that the Iranian nuclear program was necessarily for non-peaceful ends. Giving the benefit of the doubt is both a powerful encouragement and a valuable bargaining chip in a negotiation. Finally, Brazil and Turkey have always recognized Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program, to which every member of the NPT is entitled, so long as the clauses of the treaty and the regulations of the IAEA are respected.

We were aware that the swap agreement was a gateway for a broader negotiation regarding Iran's nuclear program. Brazil and Turkey were always clear that the Tehran Declaration did not solve all questions regarding the Iranian nuclear program. Important issues, such as Iran's advance to 20 percent enrichment and the quantity of uranium in Iran's possession, would certainly be part of future discussions, once confidence was created.

Much to our surprise, on the day following the Tehran Declaration, the powers that had seemed more interested in a deal rushed to announce that a new round of sanctions by the Security Council would still be pursued, irrespective of the results achieved by President Lula and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Eventually, new sanctions were imposed against Iran by the Security Council on the very day the so-called Vienna Group submitted its comments on the Tehran Declaration to the IAEA, allowing no time for Iran to reply. In other words, even if Iran complied with all the P-5+1 demands, Iran would still be subject to a new round of sanctions.

The reaction of the original proponents, for reasons that may be the object of speculation but do not stand the test of objective argument, was nonetheless to pursue the adoption of sanctions against Iran. It must be said, in regard to sanctions, that Brazil for one (but most likely Turkey also) always pointed out to the Iranian authorities—I did that to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad himself—that although we much preferred the route of dialogue to that of sanctions, if those came to be adopted by the Security Council, Brazil would duly abide by them. This of course would run counter to Tehran's expectations of greater cooperation with Brazil and contribute to her further isolation. To what extent this message (of which, as I made abundantly clear, I was only the bearer) may have influenced the Iranian decision to accept the essential elements of this confidence-building agreement is difficult to ascertain. But the Iranian authorities were left in no doubt in this respect.

The Turkish–Brazilian diplomatic efforts did not produce the effects we desired, mainly due to a change of heart on the part of Washington. As former IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei said in an interview to a Brazilian newspaper: if the original proponents of the swap agreement did not take the Tehran Declaration as a basis to continue negotiations, such an attitude surely meant that “they could not take yes for an answer.”

It seems that in matters concerning peace and security, global governance is still the reserved territory of the five permanent members. The moment two developing countries, both non-permanent members of the Security Council, reached a major breakthrough that could have paved the way for renewed dialogue on the Iranian nuclear program, the traditional powers showed all their diligence in maintaining their ‘market reserve’ on issues they considered beyond the reach of those they saw as newcomers.

But to myself as well as to many people around the world with whom I had the opportunity to talk about the subject, usually at their initiative, the Turkish–Brazilian endeavors proved the value of having new actors, with fresh approaches as well as a greater capacity to dialogue, participating in the search of solutions to difficult subjects.

The passing of time makes an agreement based on the same premises more difficult to achieve. The mere mathematics on which the original proposal was made does not hold any more. The gap between the quantity of fuel Iran needs for the TRR and the amount considered necessary to offer enough guarantee that Iran would not be able to have a nuclear weapon (supposing it is really pursuing this path) tends to widen as Iran, in spite of its acknowledged difficulties, continues to produce low enriched uranium. Personally, I still believe diplomacy can prevail. And the TRR fuel swap will be a necessary reference, even if, for political and technical reasons, adjustments have to be made. The importance of the Tehran Declaration will be recognized sooner or later. In any future attempt to go back to the diplomatic path, due attention should also be given to the approach adopted by Brazil and Turkey—mutual respect, cooperation, and bona-fide reciprocal flexibility. It is hard to imagine that real progress can be achieved while those parameters remain outside the negotiating room.

### **Arab Democracy**

In my multiple encounters with my Egyptian counterparts, in the past few years, I have always perceived a sense of pride, based on Egypt’s long history dating back to the dawn of civilization. References were often made to Cairo as the ‘lighthouse of the Middle East.’ For anyone who had the privilege of visiting this country and could see the marvels of antiquity, from the pharaohs to early Christianity, as well as the powerful monuments that testify to the Muslim contribution to humanity, this seems a very suitable metaphor. And yet it always struck me that Egyptian influence was not

as strong as it could be, partly because of regional rivalries but partly on account of her rather closed political system.

Although Egypt enjoyed the benefit of a surprisingly free exchange of ideas and even a relatively free press (my knowledge comes only from texts in foreign languages, but an article recently published by the president of the American University in Cairo, Lisa Anderson, in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, also highlights this somewhat astonishing feature of the Egyptian system), the country's natural force of attraction seemed diminished by the divorce between the government elites and the people in the streets. On one occasion, while discussing a very sensitive issue with a highly placed official (not belonging to the foreign ministry, I must add), I was struck by the casual way he referred to the possibility of an armed conflict involving another Muslim country. I could not hide my bewilderment provoked by his cold, almost detached analysis of the alternatives involved, the degree of damage that might be inflicted, the capacity for reaction on the part of the country concerned, etc. I asked whether the hypothesis we were discussing would not provoke a strong, maybe violent reaction on the part of the people in the Muslim and Arab countries (the 'Arab street,' an expression that has acquired a totally new significance with recent events). My interlocutor simply replied, rather nonchalantly, as if that detail had not occurred to him before: "Oh yes, that might be true." Well, as it happened, that catastrophic hypothesis did not need to materialize for the voice of the Arab street to start changing the course of events in Tunis, Cairo, and elsewhere.

Although in some cases it was punctuated by tragedy, in others, including Egypt, the path to democracy seems to be firmly established. But the road to democracy—just like the "road of love" in the well-known American song—is a bumpy one. Having gone along that road in the last quarter of a century—with some success, one may claim—Brazil as well as other countries of South America may have some experiences to share with our Arab friends. Once all the dust has settled (and eventually it will settle, in some places faster than others) the South America–Arab Countries Summit may reveal itself to be an even more useful forum than we ourselves have envisaged, adding a totally new political dimension to its discussions, on the basis of a mutually respectful dialogue among equals, without impositions or moral lessons of any sort.

There is much to be gained if countries like Brazil and Egypt could start exchanging experiences in this field. One may be surprised to learn that, in spite of the obvious differences, many problems on that bumpy road are common to any process of democratization, like combating corruption, dealing with social inequality, and establishing a credible electoral system. Of course, the 'lighthouse of the Middle East' will continue to shine—and ever more brightly—with the light it generates. But no harm will be done if, in addition, it reflects the glimmers coming from other countries' experiences.