



A Perspective of a Friendly Relationship Between Chile and Palestine



By Ambassador Christian Hodges-Nugent

Chile is home to the largest Palestinian community living outside the Middle East. Indeed, approximately half a million people, who are second-, third-, and fourth-generation, live today fully integrated into the Chilean society. The ancestors of the vast majority came from the Christian cities of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour.

Migration to Chile started at the end of the nineteenth century by people in search of better economic opportunities and trying to escape the strict Ottoman military rule. It continued well into the first quarter of the twentieth century. The first emigrants, who traveled with their Ottoman passports, began an epic journey that took them from the ports of Haifa and Jaffa, via European Mediterranean ports, and across the Atlantic Ocean and the Andes Mountains, until they finally reached the cities of the Central Valley in Chile.

The contribution that the Palestinian community has made to the development of the country has been immense, and today it is recognized as one of the richest and most influential communities in our society. Its members have been industrialists, businessmen, bankers, owners of commercial enterprises; they occupy dominant positions in national politics; they are important figures on the academic, literary, and sociocultural scenes. This is what has given rise to the popular Chilean saying: "In every town in Chile, there is an priest, a *carabinero* (policeman) and a Palestinian."

Consequently, the Palestinian community in Chile has many institutions that proudly represent them in the most diverse fields: cultural, social, and athletic. Examples are the Palestinian Community of Chile, the Belén 2000 Foundation (Bethlehem 2000 Foundation), the Palestinian Social Club of Santiago, and the Palestinian Sports Club.

The latter was founded on August 20, 1920, in the city of Osorno. Its main activity is men's football. The team competes in the first division and was champion in the 1955 and 1978 tournaments. In one of his visits to Chile, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas pointed out that *Palestino* is more than a football team: it represents both the Palestinian nation and the "just cause for freedom, justice, and peace." This sincere expression is reflected in

the motto of the football club: "More than a team, it is a whole people." The club now has a presence in Palestine with two soccer academies for children operating in Ramallah, and with plans to open its doors in other cities in the country.

Since the restoration of Chilean democracy in 1990, political relations between Chile and Palestine have undeniably been excellent under all successive governments of Chile, including the current government of President Gabriel Boric under which, relations are enjoying a new momentum. The formalization of diplomatic relations between Chile and Palestine dates back to 1990, when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) established an Information Office in Santiago. Jiries al-Atrash was the first Palestinian Representative designated



Celebration of Chile Day.



by the PLO to open an official mission in Chile in March 1990. With the appointment of Hussein Abdel Khaliq in May 1992, relations between the PLO and the Chilean government have been strengthened for the long run.

It should be noted that during the government of the late President Salvador Allende (1970-1973) a pro-Arab diplomacy was developed within the framework of the strategy of rapprochement with the Third World and adherence to anti-imperialist rhetoric. Following the military coup of September 11, 1973, led by the dictator General Augusto Pinochet, who chose to break with this policy, the contacts between Chile and the PLO weakened, while relations with Israel were strengthened.

Following the Oslo Accords and the formation of the Palestinian National Authority, the Information Office of the PLO was renamed Representation of Palestine in Chile, in January 1994. Since then, the PLO, recognized as the Representative of the Palestinian People, maintains a representative office with a number of diplomatic privileges and immunities. It was designated as an Embassy when Chile recognized Palestine as a state in January 2011.

For its part, Chile was the first country in Latin America to open a representative office to the Palestinian National Authority in Ramallah, on April 6, 1998. As mentioned above, on January 7, 2011, the Government of Chile officially recognized the State of Palestine “as a free, democratic, independent, and sovereign state,” politically consolidating the traditional relationship of friendship between the two peoples. In 2012, Chile cosponsored Resolution No. 67/19 of the United Nations General Assembly, which recognized Palestine as a non-Member Observer State in the

United Nations, a status that it enjoys to this day, pending its recognition as a full-fledged member.

As for high-level visits, which are the face of an excellent bilateral relationship, we highlight those made by President Sebastián Piñera in March 2011, which was the first by a Chilean head of state to Palestine, and in June 2019, during his second term. For his part, President Abbas has visited Chile three times: in May 2005, November 2009, and May 2018.

Chile and Palestine have signed a significant number of bilateral agreements, including the Memorandum of Understanding for Scientific, Technical, Cultural, and Educational Cooperation (1995); the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministries of Health of Chile and of the Palestinian Authority on health matters, signed on July 9, 2015, which has served as the basis for dozens of medical missions, comprised of Chilean professionals, who traveled to the West Bank and Gaza to provide medical and humanitarian assistance in various specialties; the Memorandum of Understanding on Economic Cooperation (2011); an Agreement on Visa Waiver for Holders of Diplomatic and Official Passports (2018); the Memorandum of Understanding on Cultural Cooperation (2017); the Agreement for the Establishment of a Joint Ministerial Committee (2017); and the Agreement on the Establishment of a Joint Commission for Cooperation Purposes (2019).

In the parliamentary sphere, it is important to mention that there is a Friendship Group in the Chamber of Deputies, which in the current legislature consists of 71 parliamentarians and is co-chaired by Deputies Jorge Brito (RD) and Marcos Ilabaca (PS). Nine of its members traveled to Palestine in May 2022

upon the initiative of the Palestinian Community of Chile. There is also a similar group in the Senate, chaired by Senator Alfonso de Urresti (PS), with Senator Sergio Gahona (UDI) as vice chairman.

The friendship between the two countries is manifested in the consistent position that Chile has had on the Palestinian issue, which evolved into a state policy, reflecting the consensus between the administrations of different political affiliations that succeeded each other since 1990 until now. This is based on the fundamental principles of the Chilean foreign policy, which are the unrestricted respect for international law, the United Nations Charter, international humanitarian law, and human rights.

Chile has consistently supported the “two independent states” solution, recognizing the right of the Palestinian people to constitute a sovereign state, as well as the right of the state of Israel to exist within secure and internationally recognized borders. Similarly, Chile considers

essential the relaunch, with the support of the international community, of a negotiation process leading to a just, comprehensive, and lasting peace agreement.

There is a mechanism for bilateral political consultations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Chile and of the State of Palestine, according to which the main issues on the global, regional and bilateral agenda are discussed and reviewed. The first meeting of political consultations between Chile and Palestine was held in Ramallah in June 2014, and was chaired by Edgardo Riveros, then Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs of Chile. The second meeting was held in Santiago in May 2017, and was headed by Ambassador Milenko Skoknic, the Acting Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs of Chile; on the Palestinian side it was chaired by Mr. Tayseer Farahat, then Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs. At the end of October 2022, the third meeting was held in Santiago, between the Undersecretary of Chile, Ximena Fuentes, and the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of Palestine, Amal Jadou.

Ambassador Christian Hodges-Nugent presenting his credentials to President Mahmoud Abbas in June 2021.





The Dean of the Faculty of Nursing at Bethlehem University receiving a donation of an ECG device.

The excellent friendly relationship between the two countries is also reflected in the traditional support that Chile has given to Palestine in multilateral forums. Since 1990, Chile has systematically voted in favor of the resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly in defense of the rights of the Palestinian people. In what represents one of the most important milestones at the level of resolutions in multilateral organizations, on October 4, 2011, in Paris, Chile voted in favor of the recommendation proposal addressed to the General Conference to admit Palestine as a UNESCO member state. Furthermore, on October 31 of that same year, at the 11th plenary session of the General Conference, the admission of Palestine was put to a vote, and the motion was widely approved.

From the human rights perspective and within the framework of the agenda of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Chile, with co-sponsorship, has voted in favor of the annual resolutions under item 7 of the agenda: Right to self-determination of Palestine; End of Israeli settlements in

the Palestinian territory; Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem; and Justice for all violations of international law in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem.

In the field of bilateral trade there is much to be done. The possibilities in the nascent exchange are many. We encourage entrepreneurs from both countries to explore business opportunities. We have contacted the business associations of Chile and Palestine, SOFOFA (Sociedad de Fomento Fabril) and PBA (Palestinian Businessmen Association), and hope that they will be encouraged to make reciprocal visits to identify possible business niches, especially now that the pandemic seems to be a bad nightmare. We see real opportunities for Palestinian products like olive oil and dates. The Bank of Palestine is present in both countries and will surely be willing to support this business approach. To this end, in June 2019, the National Customs Service of Chile assigned a customs country code for Palestine so that statistical information on real trade between Chile

and Palestine can be provided. Until that date, there were no records of commercial exchange with Palestine since transactions were automatically registered under the Israeli code.

In the field of cooperation, important steps are being taken to work on programs between the agencies of both countries, AGCID (Agencia Chilena de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo) and PICA (Palestinian International Cooperation Agency), such as the program that focuses on institutional strengthening of PICA, with the support of the Islamic Development

heritage, inaugurated at the Austrian Hospice in Jerusalem and recently mounted at the Icon Center and Dar Al-Sabagh Centre in Bethlehem; we hope it will continue traveling to other cities;

- A visit by the Chilean writer of Palestinian origin Lina Meruane took place last November. She presented her two literary works translated into Arabic: *Becoming Palestine* and *Blood in The Eye*;
- We have also facilitated the donation to the Faculty of Nursing of Bethlehem University of modern equipment to develop telemedicine in Palestine, in a public-private effort.

As we have seen, during more than thirty years of bilateral relations, we have exchanged important high-level visits, and have been building a lasting relationship, step by step, but I am sure that there is still a lot more to be done, particularly in promoting trade and bilateral cooperation. The ties between Chile and Palestine are very strong, and during my administration I will continue making the utmost to strengthen them further at the political, economic, cultural, and cooperation levels.



Chile Day at the Bethlehem Peace Centre Christmas Market, December 2021, with Club Palestino's children's soccer school.

Bank. Verification visits have been made to a project that has been in development for three years, and it is just a few steps away from becoming a reality.

In the cultural sphere, we are working to strengthen the Chilean cultural presence in Palestine. To this end, a number of events have taken place:

- An important effort was made to organize a "Day of Chile" within the framework of the Bethlehem Christmas Market, in December 2021;
- Together with eight other diplomatic missions, we have participated in a photographic exhibition dedicated to the Ibero-American colonial architectural

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