

# **ARGENTINA FACING THE PALESTINIAN- ISRAELI QUESTION: A STUDY ON THE POSITIONS ADOPTED BY THE ALFONSÍN ADMINISTRATION (1983-1989)**

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## **Introduction**

Different actors and even geographical areas with which Argentina has prioritized its ties can be traced overtime. However, the Middle East has never had a special place in the agenda of external relations of the country. On the contrary, it has been a marginal area with regard to its relations both in political and economic terms. This can be explained by the geographical gap between those territories; also, by the lack of shared idiosyncrasies, such as religion, and social and cultural terms, since the South American country is markedly different from the states comprising the space that has been called the Middle East – an area in which, moreover, coexist different ethnic and religious groups, as well as different political regimes, and which has become internationally notorious internationally for its high number of conflicts.

In fact, this area has been the stage of some of the major conflicts that have taken place in recent times. Among them, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has kept the region on the edge for decades because of its serious regional

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implications and the large number of actors, statal or not, directly or indirectly involved in the dispute.

Overtime, Argentina has adopted an equidistant position about the Palestinian-Israeli question. Also, many administrations have chosen to support conciliatory resolutions adopted within international organizations.

Indeed, Argentina has defended the peaceful settlement of the conflict, urging the parties to comply with the resolutions emanating from the United Nations Security Council. In this regard, it has supported the search for a stable and lasting peace based on the recognition of the right of Palestinians to form an independent state with its own territory, and also exercise their inalienable right to self-determination. As well as the right of Israel to live in peace within secure and internationally recognized borders, in accordance with the provisions of Resolutions No. 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) of the UN Security Council.

Considering the aforementioned factors, the aim of this study is to analyze Argentina's foreign policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the Raúl Alfonsín administration (1983-1989). The article is based on the assumption that the search for a solution to this conflict was not amongst the themes of primary interest to the Argentinean government under this *Partido Radical's* administration. On the other hand, we sustain that the Alfonsín administration embraced the traditional equidistance policy historically adopted by Argentina towards the Israeli-Palestinian dispute as a hypothesis. Finally, the chosen period, extending from December 1983 to July 1989, is justified by the shortage of studies that address this theme during these years.

In addition, it is important to specify a set of concepts that are central to the analysis: foreign policy, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, equidistance, change and continuity in foreign policy.

Thus, when referring to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we approach the dispute between the people of Israel and the Palestinian people, also as part of an even larger dispute, the Arab-Israeli conflict, involving the State of Israel and its Arab counterparts.

In order to situate ourselves in time and space, it is important to stress that the conflict has a long history, although it is still relevant in the agenda of international politics nowadays. In fact, although there is no consensus about its origins, many analysts agree to point out that the beginning of the conflict happened in 1947, when the United Nations opted for the partition of the

Palestinian territory, as stipulated in Resolution 181/11 of the General Assembly.

On that occasion, Argentina was one of the countries that abstained from voting. In this regard, there have been various studies that attempt to explain the motives that guided the country to choose that position (Rein 2007; Botta 2011). Initial motivations aside, the truth is that such position was the starting point of what would become the Argentinian equidistance pattern that has prevailed in respect to this conflict.

As already stated, the country has tended to embrace for years this equidistance policy, based on the concern of various administrations to balance any gesture or action that could be interpreted as a gap in the equal treatment of the leading protagonists of the dispute (Mendez 2009, 89) and has been in line with the will to preserve good relations with both sides presented by successive national administrations.

Under this logic, the search for compensation of favorable gestures to one or another actor is explained by the Argentine will to avoid assuming internal and external costs that would come along with aligning with one of the parties, especially considering the limited relevance of this dilemma within the agenda of Argentina's foreign policy.

On the other hand, since this is an article about Argentina's foreign policy, it should be mentioned that it is conceived as a public policy (Ingram and Fiederlein 1988), which is expressed in a set of decisions and actions taken by authorities of a state, in response to certain demands and conditions, both internal and external. These decisions are calculated to change or to preserve the conditions of the international context, always aiming to promote the interests and values of the state in the international system (Perina 1988, 13).

The Alfonsín administration's foreign policy did not evince a change that could be translated into a break of that equidistance pattern—understanding “change” as the abandonment of one or more of the foreign policy orientations and the variations in the content or ways of putting that policy into practice. On the contrary, the administration has primed for the continuity of traditional position concerning the conflict—the idea of “continuity” being the maintenance without interruption of certain guidelines

in one or more areas of foreign policy issues and in the basic dynamics of decision-making (Russell 1991, 10-11).

### **The main axes of the Alfonsín administration foreign policy**

Raúl Alfonsín came into the presidency of Argentina on December 10, 1983 after the completion of the first democratic elections in the country after ten years.

Domestically, right after years of a cruel military rule, the president had to face strong demands of the population, then centered on the respect for civil liberties, human rights and the punishment for crimes committed under the previous order. He also had to take charge of a complex economic situation characterized by fiscal deficit, external debt, capital flight and high inflation.

With reference to the external ambit, Alfonsín found an internationally isolated country. Violations of human rights, the rejection of the arbitral award on the Beagle issue and the subsequent escalation of the conflict with Chile, which led Argentina to the brink of war with the Transandinean country, as well as the Falklands War, all resulted in the loss of credibility and foreign confidence in the state.

Regarding the international scenario in which the new administration took power, the first half of the eighties was characterized by renewed tensions between the two superpowers in the context of the Cold War. In fact, the Reagan administration outlined his foreign policy based on the perception of a Soviet advance in the Third World during that period.

Meanwhile, the conflicts in Central America and the debt crisis that affected the whole of Latin America cannot be overlooked in the regional level. The first installed the fear that the domestic condition of Nicaragua and El Salvador could escalate and endanger the democratic transitions in other Latin American countries. The second, linked to the strong financial flows that entered the region during the previous decade and the subsequent increase in international interest rates, was particularly hard to Argentina, which stopped receiving external funding after the Mexican default declaration along with other states of the region.

After this brief description of the context in which the new government came to power, this article will start to work on the main lines of its foreign

policy taking as a source for analysis the inaugural address to the Legislative Assembly of December 10, 1983 .

In terms of principles, the new president stated during the speech that “[we will] sustain in foreign policy the principles of national sovereignty, self-determination of peoples, non-intervention, equality of sovereign states and Latin American solidarity” and that “[we will] support the aspirations of developing countries, the universal observance of human rights and non-alignment”. Then, Alfonsín added: “we will accommodate national tradition in favor of peaceful settlement of disputes” (Alfonsín 1983, our translation).

On the other hand, from a broader approach the head of state highlighted that “our policy [would] be one of independence, in harmony and friendship with all members of the international community, and based on the recognition of ideological plurality and on the decisive rejection of every form of imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism.” He also emphasized that “from a position of strict non-alignment, an action in support of the distension between blocks must be made effective” (Alfonsín 1983. Our translation).

Regarding the relations with the United States, they were described as “difficult” and it was asked that this nation could change its behavior in Central America, arguing in favor of the principle of nonintervention.

On other subjects, the new administration announced it would give priority to emphasize links with developing countries and it affirmed its goal of maintaining an active participation in international forums that were an expression of it, such as the case of the Non-Aligned Movement and the G77.

Accordingly, the need to prioritize relations with the Latin American republics was stressed. Afterwards, it was highlighted that it was imperative to intensify cooperation with Asian and African countries.

Other topics that were also emphasized were: the importance of curbing the arms race, the Central American crisis, the claim over the Falkland Islands and the defense of a reorganization of international economic relations.

Finally, regarding the issue promptly relevant here, President Alfonsín also referred in his speech to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With reference to this topic, the head of state embraced the traditional Argentinian position on the case to plead in favor of “respect for the existence of Israel, whose people have the inalienable right to live in peace without the constant concern of

hostile acts” and also the “respect for the aspiration of the Palestinian people to freely architecting their destiny in their own land” (Alfonsín 1983. Our translation). This statement is listed by Méndez (2008, 112) as the most open manifestation of the traditional principle of equidistance supported by the Argentinian government about the case.

As understood after the aforementioned declarations, the *Radical* administration formulated a conceptual framework in order to start this new phase of external relations. This framework then established that “Argentina [was] a Western, non-aligned and developing country”. In the words of Foreign Minister Dante Caputo (1986. Our translation): “those are the three basic elements of our national reality from which we build our relationship with the world”. To which the aspiration to be a moral power was added: “[...] not just a country in which human rights are respected, but from now also a country that raises its voice against any violation of these rights in any part of world” (Alfonsín 1984. Our translation).

In this context, the Alfonsín administration outlined as the main objective of its foreign policy to achieve the international reinsertion of Argentina. According to Russell (1994, 7), the basic pillars of the foreign policy that pursued these objectives were: the development of a mature relationship with the United States; the active participation towards problems that were part of the North-South issue; the strengthening of relations with Latin America; and the narrowing of political and economic relations with Western Europe.

Thus, the reinsertion was thought as based on a multilateral framework and was not restricted to a special relationship with the hegemonic power, as it was the case during the Menem administration. On the contrary, it intended to expand the number and range of partners partners that Argentina had in the international level, in order to broaden its margins of autonomy (Simonoff 1999, 80).

Regarding the link with the Middle East, as mentioned, it was one of the areas in which Argentina maintained a low profile relation, which in some ways is evinced by finding that Alfonsín visited only two states in the region during his whole administration: Algeria (1984) and Saudi Arabia (1986). It is worth mentioning that a trip to Israel, which would transform the *Radical*

leader into the first Argentinian representative to visit the Jewish state, was also planned, but it was postponed.

It is important to add that during this period the region went through a particularly complex situation due to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, the confrontation between Iran and Iraq and, of course, the ongoing conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, which was far from reaching a solution. However, in spite of this scenario, there was no foreign policy framework for this region. Quite the opposite, routine and punctual actions based on specific interests prevailed (Lechini 2006).

On the other hand, the democratic regime parted itself from its predecessor and highlighted the similarities and not the differences between Argentina and Southern nations, based on their condition of underdeveloped countries (Lechini 2006, 40). Thus, the region was considered as a part of the South-South Cooperation strategy which implementation was meant to help Argentina to come closer to other Third World countries seeking joint solutions to common problems concerning the North. So, the implemented agenda for the region particularly sought to gain support for Argentina's claim to the Falkland Islands and also to a political approach to the problem of external debt, among other issues (Carrancio 1994, 279). In fact, the Arab vote was important not only to the Malvinas issue but also for the election of Chancellor Caputo for the presidency of the UN General Assembly during its 43<sup>rd</sup> session in 1988. Moreover, although this issue will not be studied in this work, the sales of military equipment to Iran continued, as well as the deepening of scientific-technological cooperation regarding knowledge exchange and joint work in the nuclear ambit with other countries of the region.

With reference to the specific conflict here analyzed, as evinced below, Argentina continued to embrace the policy that became the traditional pattern of the country concerning this dispute: equidistance.

After this first approach to the subject, the following sections aim to analyze the link between the Argentinian government, Jewish communities and local Arabic and their respective countries/reference entities. The country's position on the conflict in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and in the United Nations (UN), the main multilateral arenas chosen to treat this subject, are also going to be approached.

## The relation between the *Radical* government, the Jewish local community and the State of Israel

The link between the new Argentinian government, the State of Israel and the Jewish community began to be constructed right after the *Radical* administration took office. The presidential inauguration ceremony was attended by a delegation sent by State of Israel, in which David Kimche, Director General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, took part. However, as discussed below, while the relationship with the local community seemed to consolidate daily, once the final balance of the administration is made, the relations with Tel Aviv were not equally positive. Although the relations between the two states did not necessarily deteriorated, that link was not up to the relationship the Argentinian government had with the local Jewish community.

During the first phase of the Alfonsín government, accordingly to the difficult domestic situation and the aforementioned demands concerning the punishment for crimes committed under the previous regime, the Argentina-Israel relations were strongly characterized by the eagerness of both parties to establish the fate of Jews that had disappeared during the military dictatorship. Therefore, a fact that both Tel Aviv and the local Jewish community regarded as very positive was the appointment of two Jews<sup>2</sup> to join the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP, initials in Spanish), whose formation was driven during the first months of the *Radical* administration.

A correlated fact, Israel sent a parliamentary delegation to Argentina in March 1984 in order to request information to CONADEP. The members of the delegation were received by the Minister of the Interior, Antonio Troccoli, in the context of a meeting at which the Israeli Ambassador in Argentina, Dov Schmorak, asked Buenos Aires to use his position in the Third World to avoid constant condemnations of Israel in international forums (JTA 1984a). Thus, this order becomes a clear example of the pressures that the *Radical*

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<sup>2</sup> Gregorio Klimovsky, part of the Latin American section of the World Jewish Congress, and Rabbi Marshall Meyer, leader of the spiritual congregation Beth El.

administration suffered along its entire management from both the government of Israel and the local and international Jewish communities, aiming the adoption of favorable attitudes to their interests by Argentina. However, Buenos Aires did not reply to that request, since becoming a partner of one of the parties involved would surely have higher costs than benefits for a country with no vital interests at stake in the conflict. This was especially important in a time when, as aforementioned, Argentina struggled to achieve its international reinsertion and aspired to expand the number and range of its external linkages, including the Arab countries.

Later, President Alfonsín and Chancellor Caputo received in Buenos Aires Nathan Perlmutter, National Director of the Anti-Defamation League and of B'nai B'rith, as well as other members of the League's Department of Latin American Affairs. Another example of the broad political contacts that were held with senior officials of the Jewish community worldwide was the arrival of the President of the World Jewish Congress, Edgar Bronfman, in September 1984. The latter met the first Argentine president at a meeting when Alfonsín expressed its rejection of the association between Zionism and racism, and even proposed to contribute for an approach that would serve to address the issue of Soviet Jews (JTA 1984b). Afterwards, in another sign of goodwill towards the community and the State of Israel, Alfonsín sent a draft law to the National Assembly punishing discrimination based on race or religion, in which special reference to discrimination against Jewish citizens was made, accompanied by a message that emphasized the commitment of the democratic government to respect for and promotion of human rights.

Besides, a very present subject during Alfonsín administration that generated a strong concern in Tel Aviv and among members of the local Jewish community was the possibility that the Argentine government would grant permission for the establishment of a delegation from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the country. At that time, the Jewish community press highlighted the heavy advertising that began after November 29, day of solidarity to the Palestinian people, and statements by senior officials of the Arab community that held it was very likely that the government could make something about it (JTA 1985a). Indeed, even the traditional daily Argentine Financial Field mentioned the pressures from the Arab and Jewish

communities, for and against that permission, which the national government was under (JTA 1985c). In this context, DAIA requested a meeting with national authorities in order to express their resentment to the granting of such authorization, particularly bearing in mind the Argentine solidarity with the Third World, especially in a time when the country's nomination for the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement was under consideration. However, President Alfonsín pledged "no support to any initiative that could be detrimental to national unity" during the meeting (JTA 1985d).

The stance adopted by the government when addressing this issue is easily understood if one considers, first, the limited support, both international and regional, held by the PLO at that time and, second, the good relations between the local Jewish community and the national government. In fact, the fact that this community had affirmed strong support for the Alfonsín campaign during the previous elections, to such extent that the Latin American branch of the World Jewish Congress quoted itself of the fiercest defenders of such administration, cannot be overlooked (JTA 1985d).

In line with the thriving relations held with the local Jewish community, in mid-1985 Alfonsín participated of a Jewish teleological seminar, where he even received an award for his contribution to human rights and religious pluralism. Moreover, in another gesture well received by such community, and also largely a response to the efforts made, the list of candidates in the province of Buenos Aires for the legislative elections that year was headed by a Jew, Marcelo Stubrin. Indeed, a hallmark of this government applauded by the community, which for years had been kept out of the political sphere, was the widespread presence of Jews in high public offices<sup>3</sup>. A slogan then implemented by sectors of the opposition when referring to this characteristic was the "radical synagogue". Either way, this should not lead to infer a privileged Jewish presence in the political arena if one bears in mind that at that time there was also a large number of members of the Arab community who held occupied high positions. At one time during the Alfonsín

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<sup>3</sup> Among the Jews who occupied high positions in office, we can name: Marcos Aguinis, Culture Secretary; Cesar Jaroslasky, Chairman of the *Radical* bloc in the Chamber of Deputies; Bernardo Grinspun, first Minister of Economy in the Alfonsín cabinet; Leopoldo Portnoi, president of Central Bank; and James Fiterma, Secretary for Public Works of the City of Buenos Aires, just to name a few.

administration, nearly a third of the governors of the Argentine provinces were descendants of Arabs.

Despite the excellent relationship built with the Jewish community, it must be stressed that the link with Israel did not present the same intensity after a series of decisions adopted by Argentina, in line with its traditional stance of equidistance. These decisions were not well received by Tel Aviv. For example, Buenos Aires criticized the actions of Israel in Lebanon and the *Radical* administration rejected the Israeli response to the Intifada until the last moments of the Alfonsín government. In fact, some argue that the frustrated Alfonsín's visit to Israel, which also led to friction between the parties, was suspended because the Argentine government judged that it would be inappropriate to arrive at that country during the period of the Intifada and the subsequent repression by the Israeli army to Palestinians. Obviously, the first democratic government in Argentina after years of the bloodiest of military regimes, an administration that raised the banner of human rights and that intended to become "a moral power" was not willing to visit a country whose action was being heavily criticized by the international community at that particular moment. Another point of friction between the two governments took place after Argentina not only condemned Israeli actions in the Palestinian territory at the United Nations, but also defended the right to self-determination of the people from Palestine (JTA 1985d). Moreover, the rejection of Argentina to the move of the capital of Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem did not favor deepening the bond between the two countries. Regarding this issue, Argentina maintained its stance even after calls and efforts of Israel and the attitude of other Latin American countries that established diplomatic missions in the holy city. However, Argentina remained firm in its position, according to which a high impact action, like transferring its embassy in Israel, would be counterproductive and contrary to the policy of equidistance. For a decision of such features would have undoubtedly affected the relations with some Third World countries, and particularly with other states in the Middle East with which Argentina was also interested in preserving their ties, as old as those held with the State of Israel. Furthermore, Argentina traded with Iran not only grains, but also weapons, scientific and technological cooperation was advancing at the nuclear level with this and other countries in

the region, and the Latin American also support needed these countries's support in international forums. This support was especially needed when dealing with subjects that, unlike the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, had a leading role in Argentina's foreign policy agenda, as was the case of Malvinas and the political negotiation of debt, at a time when the country was facing a serious crisis economic.

On the other hand, despite of the aforementioned disagreements, the national government strongly condemned the attack on a synagogue in Istanbul in mid-1986 and the Argentine president met with former Israeli president Ephraim Katziren during the Latin American Conference of Friends of the University of Tel Aviv. It is also worth to mention the signing of an agreement between the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET, initials in Spanish), the National Institute of Industrial Technology (INTI, initials in Spanish), and the Faculty of Physics and Science of the Universidad de Buenos Aires with the Weizmann Institute, as well as the visit of the deans of the Universidad Nacional de Rosario and Universidad del Salvador to Israel in 1987. Moreover, it is particularly important to note that before the uprisings of Easter, the Foreign Affairs Minister of Israel sent a message of support and encouragement to the Argentine government (Singer 1989, 273). These actions show that although Israel did not perceive the relations with Argentina greatly, they remained friendly.

To conclude this section, a brief consideration for the competing positions that arose within the Jewish community after the approval of the *Obediencia Debida* and *Punto Final* acts must be added. Although some sectors defended the need for the introduction of such legal instruments in order to advance a process of democratic consolidation and national reconciliation, others harshly criticized the policy adopted by the *Radical* government, including David Goldberg, then president of DAIA (Singer 1989, 273). It can definitely be argued that the local Jewish community institutions manifested a strong support for the democratic regime that went hand in hand with some criticism to the adoption of the aforementioned laws.

### Claims made by the incipient pro-Palestine organizations

With regard to the Arab community in Argentina, the third most relevant in the country, institutional development has a long history, having begun in the late nineteenth century. However, the most important institution acting on its behalf, FEARAB Argentina, a tertiary institution that gathers various provincial federations, was created in 1972 and has generally maintained a friendly relationship with the diverse national administrations ever since.

A feature of the Alfonsín administration that has to be highlighted is that it coincides with the very institutional development of the Palestinian community in Argentina. A few months before *Radicalismo* came into power the foundations of what would later become the Argentine-Palestinian Federation were being laid. This institution, the first to finally represent this small community in the country, was mobilized by a group of Chilean exiles of Palestinian origin who left the neighboring country and settled in Argentina after the coup of General Pinochet.

In 1984, this group formed a theater company that generated a space of interchange for Argentine people of Palestinian origin. This was the starting point to try to reunite the Palestinian community in Argentina and also to create instruments to publicize the situation of the Palestinian people in the country (Montenegro and Setton 2009, 6). The Argentine-Palestinian Sanaud Cultural Center (*Centro Cultural Argentino Palestino Sanaud*, in Spanish) was also created that year, with the mission to raise awareness of the history, culture and political of those territories.

In the year of 1987, the Argentine-Palestinian Federation was created. Its structure implied that the Palestinian community had the support of an institution that still today defends their interests and gives publicity to their claims, previously transmitted through representatives of other organizations of the Arab community as a whole, like FEARAB.

With respect to the entity that emerged as the sole representative of the Palestinian people internationally, the Palestinian National Authority, it should be mentioned that still did not exist in the 1980s. Hence, Argentina did not recognize the PLO in this period.

In this context, in the early-1980s the Argentine Committee of Solidarity with Palestinian People was created, from which the Palestinian

Information Office in Argentina was originated in 1985. In the words of a person who was both its director and Secretary-General, Suhail Akel, the group searched for “the vindication of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian People, the publicization of the Palestinian question, the remembrance of key dates for our people” and particularly “the defense of the recognition by the Argentine government of a future diplomatic office of the Palestinian Liberation Organization” (Diario Rio Negro 1989).

In any case, months before the establishment of such diplomatic mission and very particularly after the commemoration of the Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian people, the Jewish community explained its dissatisfaction with a strong campaign for the Argentine recognition of PLO, as aforementioned. Without going any further, the event organized by the Argentine-Arab Foundation, which took place on November 29, 1984, was attended by national government authorities, parliamentarians of the *Partido Justicialista* and the Director of International Organizations of the Foreign Ministry, Ambassador Julio Barbosa. In this context, the possibility that Parliament would require Alfonsín to recognize the PLO was suggested (JTA 1985a). Furthermore, the president of the Argentine-Arab Foundation said shortly after that the Argentine government was giving positive samples in their attitude toward the Palestinian cause (JTA 1985b).

It is worth to mention that the efforts for the recognition of the PLO in the country were also supported by the then representative of the organization in Brazil, Farid Suwwan, which at that time repeatedly traveled to Argentina to support this cause (JTA 1985d). Indeed, the head of the PLO Political Department Farouk Kaddumi also tried to visit Buenos Aires, but his visit was always discouraged (Mendez 2008, 113).

In 1985 and 1987, in line with the previously mentioned ideas, the Committee lobbied for the recognition of PLO, as well as for the establishment of a Palestinian diplomatic office in the country, by the Argentine government through various documents. In 1987, it also happened through a letter directly written to President Alfonsín and signed by many social organizations and

political parties (La Capital 1987)<sup>4</sup>. However, it appears that despite the good relationship that existed with the Arab community as a whole, the *Partido Radical* did not observe the adequate conditions for the required progress. Particularly in a moment that, as already mentioned, the PLO was viewed with suspicion by an important part of the international community and it was even perceived by the United States as a terrorist organization under its Terrorism Act (1987).

In any case, despite the position taken against the recognition of the PLO and the opening of a diplomatic mission in Buenos Aires, the Alfonsín administration tried to maintain good relations with the Arab community in general and Palestinians in particular by organizing an event in commemoration of the *Nakba* and also allowing the realization of a seminar organized by the UN Committee for the Defense of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (Mendez 2008, 113).

It should not be overlooked that it is important for every Argentine government to maintain a good relationship with both the Arab and the Jewish communities, for ultimately both hold a broad historical and social importance in the country centered on the migration flows of the late-nineteenth century. In fact, these communities contributed to the process of nation-building and they were eventually integrated into the Argentina society in such ways that preserving ties with them becomes a priority.

To conclude this section, it should be mentioned that the claim for recognition and the opening of diplomatic PLO office in Buenos Aires spread

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<sup>4</sup> Comité Argentino de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Palestino; Servicio de Paz y Justicia de América Latina; Movimiento Ecueménico por Derechos del Hombre; Partido Comunista; Partido Justicialista; Movimiento al Socialismo; Frente por los Derechos Humanos; Madres de Plaza de Mayo; Partido Intransigente; Bloque de Concejales Justicialistas de la Ciudad de Rosario; Juventud de la Liga Argentina por los Derechos del Hombre; Juventud Radical Bloque de Concejales Peronistas para la Victoria; Juventud Peronista Renovadora; la Agrupación Chile Democrático; Partido Socialista Auténtico; Juventud Demócrata Cristiana; Agrupación 17 de Octubre; Unión de Estudiantes Secundarios; Partido del Trabajo y del Pueblo; Peronismo Revolucionario; Juventud Universitaria Peronista; Familiares de Detenidos y Desaparecidos por Razones Políticas y Gremiales; Partido Socialista Popular; Bloque Intransigente del Consejo Municipal de Rosario; Partido Obrero; Partido Demócrata Cristiano; Juventud Socialista del MAS; and Centro de Estudiantes de Odontología, Humanidades y Artes, Derecho y Ciencia Política de la UNR.

throughout the 1980s. However, in this case, the pressures of external and even domestic actors were not enough for Argentina to act in this direction.

The methods used by the PLO, regarded as a terrorist organization by some countries, the distance that other states, with which Argentina sought to preserve good relations – United States and also European and Latin American countries –, kept from this organization, as well as the aforementioned pressures imposed by local and international Jewish communities, refrained the inauguration of a diplomatic office of the PLO in Argentina. In fact, there were advances in this direction during the Menem administration<sup>5</sup>, under which much closer ties with the PLO were established, in a much more favorable context than the one faced by Alfonsín, particularly after the Madrid Summit, when the reciprocal recognition of the parties and the signing of the Oslo Accords were consolidated.

In short, a country that sought international reinsertion should act moderately, avoiding to materialize actions like, for example, the authorization of a diplomatic office of the PLO in Buenos Aires, or receiving PLO representatives at a time when the organization was harshly criticized by important partners at the global level. It does not mean that the country, according to its historical procedure, stopped defending the rights of the Palestinian people in multilateral forums, as it can be observed in subsequent sections.

After the analysis of the nature of the relations with Palestinian and Jewish communities in Argentina, as well as with some of the features of bilateral relations with related countries/entities, the article is going to assess the positioning of Buenos Aires in the conflict that is object of study in international forums.

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<sup>5</sup> After being named the PLO representative in Argentina in 1989, Akel installed the first Palestinian Office in Buenos Aires in 1990, still with no official recognition of the Argentine government. In any case, the contacts, meetings and commitments with Argentine senior officials gave results when, in the mid-1990s, the official inauguration of the Palestinian delegation to Argentina was accepted. Argentina then established bilateral relations with the Palestinian National Authority.

### **The Argentinian position regarding the conflict in the NAM framework**

In regard to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the organization became a space in which the Argentina sought to promote the objectives and guiding principles of foreign policy as stated by the Alfonsín administration. It was also one of the multilateral forums in which Argentina chose to express its stance regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The *Radical* government was led by an idealist-ethic perception of international politics, but also by a pragmatism that impeded it to ignore national interests. Also, the reform of the country's participation in NAM was sought to distance itself from the image that was previously associated to the country during the military regime (Saavedra 2004, 78). Hence, the government worked towards recovering its founding principles, associated with preventing superpowers from exporting their own dispute to territories that did not adhere to any of them. Of course, it also sought to reaffirm the rights of Argentina over the Malvinas. In order to achieve these purposes, Argentina sought to be within the group of moderate countries, but with the strengthening of its actions.

Consistent with this more active and greater political commitment, the possibility of Argentina to submit its candidacy for the presidency of the movement was considered during the first stage of the chancellorship. However, it was judged that the country did not present the required conditions to advance its candidacy, since it did not demonstrate an important level of commitment and activity for long periods of time. Moreover, regarding the subject of this article, it had not associated itself to some of the great political issues of NAM, as it was the case of the situation in the Middle East (Saavedra 2004, 80). In fact, Argentina maintained ties with Israel and was generally characterized by avoiding the resolutions extremely critical of Tel Aviv, which contained recommendations for actions against this country. Besides, Argentina had distanced itself from national liberation movements, making clear reservations about the legitimacy of armed struggle. In this sense, it can be added that the start of the presidential race would have implied that Argentina made adjustments in its foreign policy, which political costs the leadership was unwilling to deal with (Saavedra 2004, 79).

As part of the movement, Argentina sought to give priority to those issues emphasized by other members, but that also did not imply clashing with

its own interests (Saavedra 2004, 89). In this context, whereas Argentina opted to sustain its traditional stance of equidistance and ruled out changes in both its relations with Israel and its position on the conflict that this country had with the Palestinians, the article do not share the opinion of authors who claim, without delving into the issue, that the Argentine government sided with the Arabs claiming that “the thirdworldism of Alfonsín twinned with whom affirmed the Israeli domination was perceived as a foreign power” (Melamed 2000, 24). By contrast, the balance between the parties in dispute became a shelter for the Argentine capacity of international insertion at that stage.

During his term in office, President Alfonsín only participated in one of the NAM summits, the VIII Summit Conference, held in Harare in 1986. The draft of the final statement of this summit had been previously prepared at a meeting in Zimbabwe and included the explicit endorsement of the movement to the acceptance of a Palestinian State at the United Nations. On the other hand, it also expressed the opposition of this group of States to Israel's participation in the United Nations Regional Commissions, making the NAM pro-Arab stance evident.

Taking this into consideration, within the framework of the VIII Summit Alfonsín recognized the right of the Palestinian people to establish an independent state within its own territory and to make use of self-determination. Also, trying to be fair to both sides, he defended the right of Israel to exist within secure and internationally recognized borders in front of an organization that still did not recognize this state. Moreover, Argentina presented reservations to those paragraphs of the final declaration in which Zionism was described as a form of racism and expressed its disagreement with the paragraph that expresses the movement's opposition to the admission of Israel as part of any economic regional commission of the UN. In fact, Buenos Aires not only disagreed with this point but also unveiled its reservation to the declaration on the grounds that this conflicted with the principle of universality of the organisms contained in the Charter of the United Nations (Saavedra 2004, 127).

This position evinces that despite the criticism that Argentina directed towards Israel for its actions in the Palestinian territories, the country valued this state when recognizing its existence and trying to avoid the sanctions and even the segregation that was somehow promoted by some NAM members.

Thus, in line with the policy of equidistance, it chose to defend the rights of both peoples, while still recognizing the concerns raised by the situation on the territory.

Finally, despite a position that sought to be balanced – yet regarded by some Arab countries as lukewarm –, the defense of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people regarding this dispute and some changes that the country made in foreign policy, as was the case of the severance of diplomatic relations with South Africa, were sufficient for the country to introduce in the final declaration of Harare a paragraph in which members of the movement emphasized strongly support for the Argentine rights over Malvinas, exhorting the parties to resume negotiations within the framework of the United Nations.

#### **The Argentinian position on the conflict in the United Nations framework**

Regarding the Argentine position on the conflict at the United Nations, Chancellor Caputo affirmed in his speech to the 40<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1985) that the Palestinian issue was of great concern to his government, and then added: "the essential aim [...] is that the Palestinian people exercise their inalienable right to self-determination and independence, to establish their own national state and have their legitimate representation in negotiations that have to be established for this purpose" (Caputo 1985). Also, the Argentine representative asked for the respect to the right to existence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries in the region, among them Israel, as well as their right to enjoy internationally recognized safe borders.

A year later, when appearing before the 41<sup>st</sup> General Assembly, the Argentine Foreign Minister again stressed:

Argentina supports the need for the Palestinian people to finally see their right to become an independent state in its own territory recognized, governing with the authorities they freely elected and making use of their full self-determination. Similarly, we reaffirm the right of all states in the region, including Israel, to live within secure and internationally recognized borders. For the same reasons, we condemn all actions that threaten the existence of these rights, like with the occupation of territories by force,

and acts of terrorism and violence that blight lives, destroy families and maim children and the youth. (Caputo 1986a, Our Translation)

From these speeches, it is possible to understand the continuity of the traditional Argentine policy of equidistance that the country once again presented for a balanced approach recognizing the rights of each of the parties on the disputed territory and condemning any violation thereto. Thus, a follow-up was given to the policy adopted by previous efforts at a time in which the balance was judged as the most reasonable choice to embrace. Especially considering that this conflict was alien to Argentina, which then had to face serious internal problems linked to the economic crisis and to demands for justice that enraged Argentine people, as well as significant external challenges, like its quest for international reinsertion.

That said, as a non-permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations during the biennium 1987-1988, Argentina had to position itself facing the crisis that sparked the first Intifada<sup>6</sup>. Then, at the beginning of the 97<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Security Council, in early December 1987, Argentina supported the proposal presented by the delegate from UAE to invite the Palestinian representative to participate of discussions on the situation of territories occupied by Israel. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that this attitude proved that the country did not ignore the role of the organization as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, although it was reluctant to strengthen ties bilaterally with the organization, in an international context that was not judged favorable at the time.

However, given the clashes that happened at that time, a draft resolution was submitted by non-permanent members of the Security Council, including Argentina. The document, adopted unanimously as resolution No. 607, affirmed: “the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War [...] is applicable to Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied by Israel since 1967, including Jerusalem”. Moreover, “Calls

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth to remember that this event had its origins in December 1987 as a spontaneous uprising of the Palestinean people in the occupied territories, which was manifested through economic boycott, resistance to the payment of taxes and also stoning of Israeli forces that were located within the territories.

upon Israel to refrain from deporting Palestinian civilians from the occupied territories.”

Days later, Security Council Resolution No. 608, the result of another draft resolution also filed by non-permanent members, called upon Israel to rescind the order to deport Palestinian civilians and to ensure that those already deported could return immediately and safely to the occupied Palestinian territories.

It is worth to add that this group of Third World states that worked as non-permanent members presented various draft resolutions in which Israeli actions in the occupied territories were repudiated throughout 1988. However, except for the aforementioned resolutions, the other drafts were not approved because of the negative votes of the United States. Still, a feature of such instruments of which Argentina was co-author is that while they denounced Israeli actions, the drafts did not propose any sanctions that, on the other hand, were not supported by the South American country. As already mentioned, Buenos Aires tried to preserve its historical ties with both Israel and with the main supporters of the Palestinian cause among Arab countries during that period.

Finally, another highlight with regard to the Argentine participation in United Nations is that the Argentine foreign minister was elected to the presidency of the General Assembly during the 43<sup>rd</sup> session in 1988. It was a particularly important stage of the Middle Eastern dispute, which coincided with the proclamation of independence of the Palestinian State, in Algiers. Besides, the United States decided to deny a visa to Yasser Arafat so that the PLO leader could not attend the session of the General Assembly to be held in mid-December 1988.

In this context, the Argentine foreign minister sided with the Secretary-General of UN to promote this meeting at the UN headquarters in Geneva, a movement that allowed Arafat to address the Assembly. During this encounter, two important resolutions were approved: on one hand, Resolution No. 43/176, which urged the organization of a peace conference in the Middle East under the auspices of UN. The resolution – which was adopted with one hundred thirty-eight votes in favor, two votes against and two abstentions – had the endorsement of Argentina, in line with one of the guiding principles of the

Alfonsín administration and also with the traditional position of the South American country, which has always favored a peaceful settlement of the conflict. On the other hand, Resolution 431/177, which acknowledged of the proclamation of a Palestinian state, received the positive vote of Argentina, one of the ten Latin American countries that supported the resolution<sup>7</sup>. However, it must be highlighted that this did not involve the formal recognition of it. The recognition was conceded only by two Latin American countries, while Buenos Aires was inclined to wait for a more favorable international context. Nonetheless, the country judged the Algiers Declaration as an important contribution to the search for a solution to the dispute (Saavedra 2004, 129).

### Conclusion

As pointed out in the beginning of the article, the situation in the Middle East in general, and particularly in the Palestinian-Israeli Question, did not occupy an important place in the Argentine foreign policy's agenda during the period between December 1983 and July 1989. On the contrary, the Alfonsín administration gave priority to the approach of other themes and to links with other geographical areas.

In the internal plan, however, a very close relation with the Jewish local community, which was a strong supporter of the *Radical* government, was maintained. On the other hand, the maintenance of the link to the Arab community was attempted. In this sense, while the relations with the first group were cordial in general, they were far more turbulent with the small local Palestinian community. As of the relations with Israel, they had not been at the level that the Middle Eastern country had desired due to the critical position adopted by Argentina after Israeli actions in Lebanon and Palestine, though political contact was productive. Regarding the relations with PLO, suspicions made clear by important partners of Buenos Aires towards the political group, as well as the fact that some of them considered these Palestinians a terrorist

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<sup>7</sup> The other nine countries of the region were Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and Peru.

organization, among other reasons, made Argentina evaluate that there were no proper conditions to establish closer relations with the organization.

As of the Argentine positions regarding this question in the framework of international organizations, Buenos Aires presented some initiatives favorable to the protection of the people involved in the conflict during its tenure as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Within the General Assembly, however, it supported a peace conference, added to other resolutions favorable to strengthen the dialogue between the parties involved.

Likewise, it is important to highlight that both in the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement, accordingly to the traditional Argentinian position on the case, the country adopted a balanced position, defending the right of the Palestinian people to organize an independent state, with its own territory, exercising its inalienable right to self-determination, as well as the Israeli right to live in peace with safe and internationally recognized boundaries. Furthermore, it is important to stress that the *Radical* government condemned the human rights violations of both Tel Aviv and radical Islamic groups, in line with its position favorable to topics related to human rights.

Finally, the equidistance policy resulted coherent for a country that was unrelated to the dispute and for a government that had to face many serious internal problems, as well as important external challenges, and that evaluated that the most profitable action would be to show no innovations, and to bet on the balance between the parties.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Middle East has been the stage of some of the major conflicts that have taken place in recent times. Among them, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has kept the region on edge for decades. The aim of this paper is to analyze Argentina's foreign policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict during the administration of Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989).

## **KEYWORDS**

Argentine Foreign Policy; Palestinian-Israeli Conflict; Alfonsín.

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