
Latin America and the Gaza crisis

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Theme

The crisis between Israel and Hamas has hit Latin American countries from various directions. The reactions have varied widely, depending on national contexts.

Summary

The Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and the severity of the Netanyahu government's response has once again placed Latin American countries, as with [the Russian invasion of Ukraine](#), in the conundrum of how to position themselves on the conflict and on the world stage. The fallout from the Gaza crisis has not been unusual by regional standards. Latin America, which does not speak in a concerted way, has again exhibited major internal divisions: apart from certain similarities and exceptions, these have emerged with the left coming out in favour of the Palestinian platform and the right voicing solidarity with Israel. There have also been some ambiguities in the search for equidistance. [Just as with Ukraine](#), Latin America has tried not to get dragged towards either of the two opposing blocs. In this case, the dilemma has been exacerbated by the presence of sizeable Jewish and Palestinian communities in some countries, which has made the conflict feel neither as distinctive nor as foreign as that in Ukraine.

Analysis

The complex geopolitical global landscape presents a constant challenge to Latin American nations searching for their place in the world and aspiring to a degree of international influence. This leads them to taking a stance on certain especially salient events. [It is what happened in 2022](#) after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and has again happened in the wake of the Hamas attack on Israel.

The region lacked a unified posture and single voice on the Ukraine crisis and the same is evident with the Middle East crisis, albeit with subtle differences. The Hamas attack on Israel has been condemned by most Latin American countries, but considerable solidarity with the Palestinians and criticisms of Israel have also been expressed. In this case, the dilemma facing politicians, the news media and public opinion in general has been intensified by the presence of major Jewish and Palestinian communities in some countries, ensuring that the conflict has felt neither as distinctive nor as distant as the one in Ukraine.

Many of these responses were to the impact of the Hamas incursion, the savagery of its acts, its indiscriminate murders and its hostage-taking, forcing many earlier positions to be qualified and revealing the unity of Latin America's so-called progressivism is not what

it seems. At the same time, the severity of the Israeli response and the unrelenting bombardment of Gaza have enabled many governments to justify themselves with their traditional anti-Israeli positions.

In the days and weeks ahead the debate will be shaped by the numbers who died and disappeared on Saturday 7 October, together with the existence of hostages held by Hamas and also by the severity of the Israeli repression. Sources in this regard are not entirely reliable, but it is known that the incursion into Israeli territory left fatalities from at least Argentina (seven), Brazil (two) and Peru (two) and more than a dozen people missing from Brazil (three), Chile (one), Colombia (two), Mexico (three), Panama (one), Paraguay (two) and Peru (two), who may swell the numbers of hostages. For now, only Argentina acknowledges the presence of 15 of its citizens held by Hamas in Gaza.

Three different positions have emerged on the conflict and its fallout, although they defy attempts at strict differentiation: support for Israel, support for Hamas and an attempt to maintain impartiality. To some extent, the latter two are shaped by the support the US gives Israel and the marked anti-imperialist sentiment in the region.

(1) Support for Israel

Most of Latin America takes the side of Israel, the country that on this occasion was attacked. Particularly notable, despite his Palestinian heritage, has been [Nayib Bukele's hardline stance on Hamas](#). Bukele, following his clash with the Biden Administration, took Russia's side in the Ukrainian crisis, as did the Bolivarian countries, but this time he has switched allegiances, no doubt because it gives the Salvadorean President a chance to draw a parallel between Hamas terrorism and the *maras* his country is combatting so bitterly. Thus, he wrote that 'anyone supporting the Palestinian cause would commit a major error by siding with these criminals. It would be like us Salvadoreans taking the side of the terrorists of MS13 [the violent Mara Salvatrucha gang], simply because we share ancestors or the same nationality'.

Most countries and their governments, using other words and methods, have also aligned themselves with Israel. [The Argentine President, Alberto Fernández](#), despite his membership of the Puebla Group, expressed his 'utter condemnation and rejection of the brutal terrorist attack perpetrated by Hamas from the Gaza Strip upon the state of Israel'. Argentina is home to 300,000-400,000 Jews, the largest Jewish community in Latin America and the fifth largest in the world.

[The Ecuadorean Foreign Affairs Minister](#) expressed his solidarity with the victims' families and the Israeli population as a whole. The President of Guatemala, Alejandro Giammattei, offered his 'condolences' and 'support' to Israel for the 'unjustified' attacks it had sustained. Guatemala has a historically close relationship with Israel, benefits from numerous aid programmes in a wide range of fields (from technology and health to security) and in 2018 became the second Latin American country to open an embassy in Jerusalem.

The 'progressive' government of the Honduran President, Xiomara Castro, condemned the Hamas attacks via its secretary of foreign relations and international cooperation. [Costa Rica restated its](#) 'absolute rejection of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, repeating its determination to continue combatting it within the framework of international law'. The Panamanian and Peruvian governments 'firmly' and 'vigorously' condemned the attack by Hamas.

In Uruguay, [President Luis Lacalle Pou published a message of condemnation](#): 'Our solidarity with Israel. We firmly condemn the Hamas attack and call for an immediate halt to violence against the Israeli people. Once again we condemn the actions of terrorists wherever they occur'. [Luis Abinader, President of the Dominican Republic](#), spoke in similar terms: 'I express my utter condemnation of the Hamas terrorist attacks against the people of Israel. This escalation of violence hampers the peace solutions we all desire. We hope diplomacy is preferred to war'. Lastly, the Paraguayan President, Santiago Peña, condemned the 'cowardly terrorist attacks' against Israel.

[Chile was an especial case](#), as the country with the largest Palestinian community in the region and with a government backed by parties traditionally critical of Israel. Although the government condemned the attack and expressed its condolences to the victims, it also called for a 'a halt to this pointless violence, to avoid an escalation that causes greater damage and suffering to the civilian population'.

(2) Support for impartiality

This group includes governments that have opted neither to give their wholehearted support to Israel nor to condemn it. Thus, for example, Brazil and Mexico, the two regional powers, have proved to be more ambivalent than some. Brazil, which holds the Presidency of the UN Security Council, condemned the attacks against Israel. But the Foreign Affairs Minister called for the 'utmost moderation' on all sides to avoid an escalation of the conflict. [President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#) 'rejected' the 'terrorist attacks' in Israel and called on the international community to work towards peace talks between the parties. 'Brazil will be unstinting in its efforts to avoid an escalation of the conflict, including through its presidency of the UN Security Council', which it convened for an emergency meeting. Lula said he was 'taken aback' by the offensive carried out by Palestinian militants from Gaza. He later called for protection for 'Palestinian and Israeli children' trapped between Israel and Hamas, and his government convened another UN Security Council meeting to address the issue.

More ambiguous was the government of Mexico, which emphasised the need for a far-reaching solution, although here too there were notable differences between the Foreign Affairs Minister and the President's office. [The Minister, Alicia Bárcena](#), said that 'Mexico favours a comprehensive and definitive solution to the conflict, based on the two-state premise, one that attends to Israel's legitimate security concerns and enables the consolidation of a politically and economically viable Palestinian state coexisting with Israel within secure and internationally recognised borders, in accordance with the pertinent United Nations resolutions'. She acknowledged Israel's right to its 'legitimate defence' and expressed her 'utmost concern' about recent events. 'Mexico unequivocally

condemns the pointless attacks carried out against the people of Israel on 7 October by Hamas and other Palestinian organisations in Gaza’.

Contradicting the stance taken by the Foreign Affairs Minister against the Hamas attack, [President López Obrador](#) refrained from using the ‘terrorist’ label for the incursions from the Gaza Strip and preferred to focus on his pacifist mantra of ‘we don’t want war’. At the same time he condemned ‘the use of force against civilians’. He also said that Mexico would stick to its traditional foreign policy principles: non-intervention, defence of national self-determination and the peaceful solution of disputes –‘We maintain that the most irrational course is confrontation, the use of force and war, which causes untold suffering. We do not want victims of wars’–.

(3) Support for Hamas

The regimes in Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba were alone in Latin America in justifying what happened and not condemning Hamas. [Daniel Ortega declared](#) himself to be ‘always supportive of the Palestinian cause, always fraternal, always on-hand’ and deplored the ‘worsening’ of the ‘terrible’ Palestine-Israel conflict. His Minister of Foreign Affairs, Denis Moncada, even received a member of the executive committee of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), Ramzi Rabah, while the escalation in the Palestine-Israel conflict was under way. [The Cuban government](#) stated that the confrontation is the ‘consequence of 75 years of the permanent violation of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and Israel’s aggressive and expansionist policy’.

Venezuela also refrained from condemning the Hamas attacks and called for ‘genuine negotiation’ between Israel and Palestine to bring about an end to the violence in the Gaza Strip. [Nicolás Maduro denounced](#) the ‘genocide’ of the Palestinian people in Gaza perpetrated by Israel, with its army’s ‘indiscriminate bombardment’. ‘For 75 years the Palestinian people have been subjected to a new apartheid. The territory is characterised by historical dispossession’. The Bolivian government released a more ambiguous statement, which refrained from openly condemning the terrorists and called for a ‘de-escalation of the violence’.

The President of Colombia, [Gustavo Petro](#), was especially condemnatory of Israel, becoming one of the most virulent critics of the Israeli response to the Hamas attacks, but without mentioning either the attacks themselves or their terrorist nature. He thus embarked upon a verbal escalation that will be very difficult to climb down from, particularly given his characteristic lack of restraint. In line with this viewpoint he said, ‘had I lived in Germany in ’33 I would have fought on the side of the Jews and had I lived in Palestine in 1948 I would have fought on the Palestinian side’. He flooded social media with these ideas and criticisms of Israel, and his remarks on the conflict got him into a spat with the Israeli Ambassador, who wrote back to him, ‘more than 100 Israeli citizens were abducted from their homes by the terrorist army of Hamas’. The presidential reply was forthright: ‘The Colombian government advocates not a single hostage being held anywhere in Palestine or Israel’. On Sunday, in an attempt to moderate the President’s message somewhat, the Foreign Ministry released a statement condemning ‘the terrorism and attacks against civilians’. Later, according to the AFP agency, the

statement was amended. The new version no longer referred to 'terrorism', but roundly condemned 'the impacts on civilians'.

Following Petro's pronouncements, the Israeli government threatened to cut off exports to Colombia, starting with security equipment. Petro's response was equally uncompromising: 'If it's necessary to suspend diplomatic relations with Israel we will suspend them. We do not support genocides. The President of Colombia will not be insulted'. He later hammered his opinions home: 'One day the Israeli army and government will ask forgiveness for what their men did on our land, unleashing genocide. I shall embrace them, and weep for the homicide of Auschwitz and of Gaza, and for the Colombian Auschwitz'. Petro's allusion to genocide in Colombia is a reference to the work undertaken by two Israeli contractors in support of the fight waged by the Colombian armed forces against guerillas and terrorism.

The direction of position-taking

On this occasion, although there have been no votes in multilateral organisations, the stances adopted over the Ukraine crisis have been repeated almost identically, albeit with subtle differences. In the previous crisis, the General Assembly's special emergency session on Ukraine was convened by the Security Council, after Moscow vetoed a resolution condemning its actions. On 2 March most Latin American countries (14 out of 18) voted in favour and the rest abstained. On 24 March the previous session's vote was again carried. Voting in favour were Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay. The four abstentions came from two out of Putin's three staunchest allies (Cuba and Nicaragua; Venezuela could not vote because of being in arrears on its membership dues) plus Bolivia and, a special case, El Salvador. Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia's votes were a logical consequence of their affinity and alignment with Moscow, while El Salvador's reflected growing estrangement from Washington, hence Bukele's decision to maintain absolute neutrality.

This time, the most unaccountable stance has come from Colombia, while the Bolivarian bloc has closed ranks. The remaining countries condemned the attack and the two regional powers criticised the aggression while emphasising the general context to explain what took place. While in Brazil the President was more outspoken than the Foreign Ministry, the opposite was the case in Mexico. In both cases, however, there were opposing attitudes between the governments and some of their political allies, especially those located more towards the left, such as the PT party. In Mexico, given the proximity of the presidential election, there was considerable expectation surrounding the attitude that the Morena party candidate, Claudia Sheinbaum, might adopt and how much she would distance herself from López Obrador. For now she is remaining resolutely loyal to her boss and mentor and, despite her Jewish heritage, she has opted for equidistance by calling for an end to violence.

Figure 1. Positions on the Israel-Hamas conflict

Favourable position towards Ukraine (14)	Favourable position towards Russia (5)	Support for Israel (12)	Support for Hamas (5)	Equidistant stance (2)
Argentina	Bolivia	Argentina	Bolivia	Mexico
Brazil	Cuba	Chile	Cuba	Brazil
Chile	Nicaragua	Costa Rica	Nicaragua	
Colombia	Venezuela	Ecuador	Venezuela	
Costa Rica	El Salvador	El Salvador	Colombia	
Ecuador		Guatemala		
Guatemala		Honduras		
Honduras		Panama		
Mexico		Paraguay		
Panama		Peru		
Paraguay		Dominican Rep.		
Peru		Uruguay		
Dominican Rep.				
Uruguay				

Source: the authors.

Various countries in Latin America, a continent characterised by immigration, have sizeable communities of Jewish and Muslim origin, Palestinian in particular. In Argentina, the country with Latin America's largest Jewish community, which suffered an attack on the Israeli Embassy in 1992 (22 fatalities) and another in 1994 against the Jewish AMIA association (85 fatalities), the President and the main candidates to succeed him have all condemned Hamas. Suspicion about the authorship of the attacks fell in both cases on Iran (a trial on the issue against the Vice-president, Cristina Kirchner, is still pending), something that also no doubt had a bearing on the forthright nature of political and governmental statements. For its part, the left supported the Palestinian cause. The Workers' Left Front (FIT) marched towards the Israeli Embassy in order to give 'its support to Palestine' and to call for an 'immediate end to the bombardment of Gaza'.

In Chile, home to around half a million citizens of Palestinian origin, the largest diaspora outside the Middle East, President Boric expressed his 'utter condemnation' of the Hamas attack, although he refrained from calling it an act of terrorism. Boric had previously expressed his sympathy for the Palestinian cause and his rejection of Israel's 'illegal occupation'. On this occasion, his government called for 'the cessation of this pointless violence'. This caused a degree of tension with the Israeli government. The Ambassador, Gil Artzyeli, described comments made by the Minister Alberto van Klaveren on the Middle East crisis 'unfortunate' and 'lamentable'. The Foreign Affairs Minister affirmed that 'the use of force against civilians is never acceptable in armed conflicts, even when exercising legitimate defence. We call on all the parties involved in the acts of violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories to respect this basic principle... This applies to Hamas, the Islamic jihad, the state of Israel and any other actor who intervenes in the conflict'.

In general, support has split along left-right lines. The left has sided with Hamas and the right with Israel. In Argentina, Myriam Bregman, the presidential candidate of the left, said, 'we're heartbroken by the civilian victims... [who] arise in a conflict that is rooted in the policy of the state of Israel, of occupation and apartheid against the Palestinian people'.

In Bolivia, the former President Evo Morales openly sided with Hamas, lamenting that 'the statement released by the Bolivian Foreign Ministry does not denounce with political coherence the true situation the Palestinian people are enduring', later adding that 'in Bolivia, we condemn the imperialist and colonialist actions of the Zionist Israeli government. Solidarity between peoples is the basis of a more just and fair society'. Morales' words and his attack on the government cannot be separated from the fierce struggle he is waging with President Arce and Vice-president Choquehuanca for control of the governing MAS party and the next presidential candidacy.

In Uruguay, the Broad Front party issued a declaration on the conflict stating that it is following 'with attention and concern the escalation of violence that is further exacerbating and worsening the coexistence between the peoples of Israel and Palestine'. For this reason it 'rejects and condemns the Hamas group's recent terrorist acts that led to hundreds of civilian deaths, injuries, hostages and displacements'. On the other hand, in line with what has been the traditional stance of this party it adds that it 'rejects and condemns the actions of the Israeli government, which is responsible for a growing number of deaths and injuries in the civilian population, in addition to an inhuman blockade that has left more than two million Palestinians without access to water, electricity and food'.

Conclusions

The Bolivarian group of countries has remained united, and although most of the other Latin American countries have condemned the Hamas attack as an act of terrorism, dissident positions have emerged (Colombia) along with others that seek to strike a complex 'fair' balance (Chile, Brazil and, above all, Mexico). Moreover, regional public opinion has revealed itself to be split, with the left (just like a certain antisemitic strand of the far right) generally closer to the Palestine platform and the right leaning in favour of Israel.

The Bolivarian governments, who backed Putin in his attack on Ukraine and are now backing Hamas, continue being a minority in the region, but are putting on a united front against the rest of Latin America, where both deserters (El Salvador in favour of Russia or Colombia in favour of Hamas) and the major powers (Brazil and Mexico) try to safeguard their autonomy from the main players on the world stage.

The Gaza crisis has again revealed [Latin American countries' secondary role in the world](#). The region has a peripheral part to play in the global arena and amid conflicts of this magnitude it fails to speak with a single or concerted voice; rather [a voice that is fragmented and divided into various parts](#). The main countries try to adopt autonomous stances, avoiding automatic alignments either with the US and the EU on one side, or with China and Russia on the other.

The existence of some major Jewish and Palestinian communities in certain Latin American countries has influenced the tone of the debate. At the same time, it has meant that the Middle East conflict is followed with greater engagement and less detachment than the crisis in Ukraine. Despite the responses however, the Gaza crisis has diverted international attention a long way away from Latin America.