

LERC attends the International Colloquium at USEK

29-30 November 2012, USEK

Reported by Liliane Haddad

The Center of Studies and Cultures of Latin America (CECAL), the Research Center for Development and Peace (CRDP), which is attached to the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities at the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK), Lebanon, and the Interdisciplinary Research Network on the Arab World and Latin America (RIMAAL), France, held an international colloquium between November 29 and 30, 2012, at the Conference Hall, USEK Main Campus, under the title of “Relations Between the Middle East and Latin America: A Decade of South-South Revival .”

Dignitaries who attended included Colonel Fouad Hamid el-Khoury, representing Interior Minister Mr. Marwan Charbel; H.E. Dr. William Habib, Directorate of Political and Consular Affairs; H.E Mr. Jorge Alvarez, Ambassador of Mexico to Lebanon; H. E. Mr. José Gutierrez Maxwell, Ambassador of Argentina to Lebanon; H.E. Mr. Hassan Khalil, Dia, Ambassador of Paraguay to Lebanon; H.E. Mr. Jose Miguel Menchaca, Ambassador of Chili to Lebanon; Youssef Zoghaib, General Consul of the Republic of San Marino to Lebanon; Mr. Sarkis Seardarian, Honorary Consul of El Salvador to Lebanon, as well as researchers, professors, public figures, and students.

Ms. Liliane Haddad, Chief Indexer and Archivist at the Lebanese Emigration Archives and Data Base, the electronic archiving wing of Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC), represented the LERC at the colloquium.



The purpose of the colloquium was to highlight the strategic, economic, diplomatic, cultural, and political dimensions between two regions of the developing world; regions that seek to enforce their ideas on the international scene and to actively participate in the development of the latter.

The First Topic - Intercontinental Power Games: emergent countries with anti-establishment diplomacies. Early ties between the Middle East and Latin America emerged from the immigration of Christian Arabs from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, under the Ottoman Empire until 1918 and then during the French and British mandates, with Brazil and Mexico being the preferred destinations. Other areas in the Americas received smaller but significant numbers of migrants from the Middle East: Palestinians to Chile and Honduras, especially San Pedro Sula, Syrian-Lebanese in Barranquilla, Colombia, and, over time, migrations of both Muslim and Christian Arabs into key trade Diasporas, such as Panama (both Panama City and Colón), Venezuela, Cuba, and other locations.

Over time, trans-regional diplomatic ties have grown considerably. Key Latin American countries have expanded the number of diplomatic missions to cover the most important Middle East counterparts. Argentina, for example, has 13 embassies in the region, with coverage of an additional seven countries. Brazil has 10, Mexico eight, Chile seven, with two separate consulate generals, Venezuela five, and Colombia three. Only Argentina and Brazil, however, are represented in the Gulf States.

Likewise, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean focus largely on relations within the Americas, then Europe and Asia, with the Middle East and Africa of secondary importance. Only Venezuela, with its determined outreach to Iran and Brazil has demonstrated higher priority interest in the Middle East.

The Second Topic - South-South Exchanges: between trade and development: economic links between the two regions are presently modest but can be expected to grow substantially in the near future because of growing commodity trading, interest among Arab investors in accessible and reasonably priced land, and current U.S. restrictions on travel for citizens of Arab States.

Current levels of trans-regional trade for the largest economies in both regions, nevertheless, are modest. Brazil, which has by far the largest trade relationship of any Latin American country with the Middle East, did about US\$18 billion in two-way trade with the region in 2008, about four percent of its world trade. Looking forward, the key driving force in a future, strengthening relations between Latin America and the Middle East will be economic – largely trade and investment.

Ties between Latin America and the Middle East have historically been modest in scope but are growing stronger. These ties are currently based on a very modest but promising economic

relationship, growing diplomatic relations in both directions, increased interregional contact in international organizations, the presence of influential communities of Arab descendants in the Americas

The Third and Closing Topic - The South-South Mediation in Question: the crises in the Middle East and the Arab and Islamic World from the perspective of Latino-American diplomacies.

Looking ahead, future strengthening of the inter-regional relationship will be driven mainly by economic variables, including commodity exports from Latin America, increased investment opportunities in both directions, and as a by-product of a globalizing world economy. Latin America has the potential to be an increasingly larger source of agricultural products and other commodities imported into the Middle East. Fast-growing populations in many countries of the Middle East, coupled with a weak regional agricultural base and the rise of Brazil and Argentina as key agricultural producers, make for a good commercial fit.

Latin America is likely to be a more welcoming environment for Middle East investors and merchants than the United States, especially in areas where U.S. rules on technology transfer apply. The development of a global business class in the Middle East and Latin America will also facilitate investment in both directions.