

Review - The Arab World and Latin America

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KEVIN FUNK, JUN 15 2016

The Arab World and Latin America: Economic and Political Relations in the Twenty-First Century

Edited by Fehmy Saddy

I.B. Tauris, 2016

Though Latin America and the Arab world have long been linked by migration, cultural similarities, and at times a “Third World” geopolitical project, it is only in the current millennium that these ties have been accompanied by serious efforts to build sustainable political and economic relations. In the past decade, Arab-Latin American trade has increased several times over, while then-president of Brazil Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva inaugurated an ongoing series of Arab-South American summits, the first ever between the regions. Diplomatic involvement—again, led by Brazil—in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the arrival of thousands of Syrian refugees to Latin America, and the establishment of direct flights have brought the regions even closer (Funk 2013).

Accompanying this real-world shift, several recent English-language works have sought to interrogate today’s Arab-Latin American encounters, focusing on diverse facets such as Brazil’s protagonism (Amar 2014), Islam (Logroño 2015), and the substantial political-economic role that the many Latin Americans of Arab descent play in their respective societies (Karam 2007).[1] Published in the context of these heady times of blossoming relations and increasing academic production, *The Arab World and Latin America*, edited by longtime observer Fehmy Saddy, promises to deliver a broad and comprehensive analysis of Arab-Latin American “economic and political relations in the 21st century,” as well as to suggest avenues for their continuing development. Yet while several of the (particularly earlier) chapters do bring to the fore important insights, as a whole this volume unfortunately does not live up to these important tasks.

As the editor of one of (if not) the first English-language books on Arab-Latin American relations – the 1983 volume *Arab-Latin American Relations: Energy, Investment and Trade*—Saddy is well situated to compile contributions that provide a systematic and historically informed overview of their trajectory, current status, and future possibilities. And indeed, with a policymaking audience in mind, he is keen to suggest that his aim is not merely to analyse, but to “promot[e]” these ties (xxviii). To that end, contributors include not only the usual cast of academics, but also a diverse crew of “policy makers, former officials, scientists, [and] business leaders” (xxviii). Notably (and impressively), many of them hail from the regions under consideration. This represents a welcome departure from the typical Global North academic practice of privileging Northern voices even when discussing the South.

Saddy’s core claim, which he expresses in the introductory chapter, is that there have been “recent shifts in the global political and economic power structures” (8) – namely, globalisation and U.S. decline – that have undermined Washington’s control of peripheral regions and set the stage for an “emerging global order” (24). This new scenario is defined, apparently, by the decentralisation of international relations and accompanying flourishing of South-South ties. In turn, as he notes, such “cooperation between Arab and Latin America [sic] countries, particularly the more advanced ones, presents a more viable alternative to their traditional relationships with the West” (11). He goes on to suggest that, “[t]his cooperation is based on the premise [of] self-reliance and sharing development experiences, as equal partners” (11).

Though much of the rest of the chapter does indeed provide, as promised, a palatable overview of Arab-Latin

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American relations, one could certainly question the assumptions underlying the above assertions. For example, are Arab-Latin American relations really based on a spirit of “cooperation” – a frequently used word in the text? Do the actors involved actually see and treat each other as “equal partners”? Are these relations indeed “a more viable alternative” to those with the U.S. and Europe? And if so, how? Regrettably, and without seeking to imply that this analysis is necessarily misguided, Saddy says little to support these and other contentions.

In a larger sense, given his appropriately strident assertion in a later chapter that “Brazil is still defined by...a culture of deep-seated greed perpetuated by privileged political and business elites” (158), as has indeed been borne out by the country’s recent crises, it is unclear why precisely Saddy is so sanguine about Arab-Latin American relations in the first place. For who else but Brazil’s “privileged political and business elites” are responsible for their rise?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is some amount of dissonance between Saddy’s assertion that these relations are part of an “emerging global order” and the arguments made in other chapters. Note, for example, Arezki Daoud’s observation that inter-regional trade remains “marginal” (210), or Cecilia Baeza and Elena Lazarou’s conclusion that, rhetoric aside, “[c]ultural and educational cooperation [between the regions] is in fact quite disappointing” (57).

To be clear, the relatively substantial growth in Arab-Latin American ties on various fronts – political, economic, cultural, and so on – is a real phenomenon and is certainly worthy of attention from scholars and practitioners alike. Yet these relations are still clearly inchoate and have much room to grow. And crucially, Saddy’s optimism aside, many of the other contributors suggest that there may not be sufficient political will for them to reach their immediate potential. Though the volume, in line with its stated purpose, does offer some suggestions for how to advance them – for example, develop “a complex network of effective rules and institutions” (91), put together “a privately financed fund for initiatives in culture,” and offer “fellowships and scholarships for interregional educational and research exchanges” (63-64) – overall there is unfortunately too little said in this regard to provide a concrete blueprint for action.

To be sure, *Arab-Latin American Relations* does feature useful analysis, particularly in the earlier sections. In addition to the introduction, particularly notable chapters include the diplomat Celso Amorim’s “Brazilian perspective” on these relations (chapter 2), Baeza and Lazarou’s analysis of cultural and educational links (chapter 3), and Osvaldo Rosales’ summary of interregional trade (chapter 4).

Yet there are too many detours in the text that are not linked to Arab-Latin American relations in a satisfyingly concrete way, including whole chapters relating to issues such as mining, agriculture, and water resources. Typical is the contribution that includes explorations of seemingly remote topics – “Chilean engineering” (233), “biological nitrogen fixation” (312), “new frontiers in immunological sciences” in Brazil (329) – without much of a clear sense, save for sparse mentions toward the end, about how they relate to the volume’s central themes.

In sum, both policymakers and those with an academic interest in Arab-Latin American relations will find valuable insights in the present volume. But overall, it is likely too scattered, inconsistent, and lacking in detail to satisfy either group.

Nonetheless, one can at least happily observe that much has changed since the early 1980s, when, as Saddy (1983, xi) noted in his aforementioned earlier volume, while “Arab-Latin American relations have grown in the last few years to an unprecedented level[.]...[t]his expansion in political and economic exchange has not received adequate attention in academic institutions or research centres and remains largely unexplored.” Indeed, a growing body of (English-language, Global North) literature is starting to pay attention. Saddy, along with others, has certainly been instrumental in bringing about this welcome and overdue change. Let us hope that future works keep the ball rolling and continue to explore the many linkages between these two seemingly distant regions.

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[1] See also the forthcoming volume: Tawil, Marta, ed. *Latin American Foreign Policies towards the Middle East: Actors, Contexts, and Trends*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Notably, a much more bountiful and longstanding body of literature on these relations – generally overlooked in Global North academic circles – exists in Spanish and Portuguese. See <http://rimaal.org/category/bibliographies/>.

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