

Research Note

Stack of Dominos Upended: Colombia, Paraguay and PalestineSanford R. Silverburg¹, Angélica Alba Cuéllar²¹Ph.D, Professor Emeritus, Department of History and Politics, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC²MA, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Universidad de Bogota Jorge Tadeo Lozano, Bogota, Colombia

In an article published by us (Alba and Silverburg, 2016), we discussed the geographical extent of South American states' recognition of the State of Palestine. The gravamen of our presentation was to note that Colombia was an outlier in this regard. The situation was dramatically reversed on August 3, 2018 when the then Colombian Foreign Minister María Ángela Holguín sent a letter to her Palestinian counterpart, Riad al-Maliki, and to the United Nations Secretary-General, António Manuel de Oliveira Guterres, indicating that her government had altered its position and was now recognizing "the free, independent and sovereign" State of Palestine (Colombia, 2018). The action was taken merely 3 days before the end of the term of then President of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, thereby demanding it would seem an examination of the timing and reason for the alteration of the former policy to be in order.

Our goal here is to describe the abrupt reversal in foreign policy decision-making by Colombia and introduce a similar alteration by Paraguay regarding its embassy in Israel. We follow the discussion, based upon available materials, with a conscious evaluation of the aforementioned conditions.

Gil (2018) argues that the President Santos was concerned that the new government would not back the decision. The elected president, she affirms, asked Santos not to include a reference to the 1967 Israel-Jordan border. Interestingly, in the letter offered by Colombia to the Palestinian diplomatic representatives, it was cautiously and strongly recommended that the matter be held in secret until the inauguration of the new Colombian president, on August 7. On the following day, the Palestinian mission in Colombia released the announcement, unleashing controversy and a heated reaction from Israel government and its Jewish community.

It appears that it was clearly recognized that this action could have serious repercussions. Indeed, once the new president, Iván Duque Márquez, was installed, the new Foreign Minister, Carlos Holmes Trujillo Garcia, seemed to indicate that the decision, made so late in the tenancy of President Santos, would be reviewed to wit:

In view of possible omissions that could arise from the way in which this decision was made by the outgoing president, the government will carefully examine the implications and will act in accordance with international law (Semana, 2018a).

But the new president, Duque, indicated in an interview on Colombian radio Caracol, that he would not reverse his predecessor's decision regarding the recognition of a Palestinian state. Accordingly, he held that:

Damage was done by the fact that there was not more institutionalized discussion

[with the Foreign Affairs Advisory Committee]. [Former] president [Juan Manuel]

Santos told me that he had made that decision, but it is irreversible, first of all, because the president of the republic is the person designed by the constitution to manage foreign relations, and cannot be altered after the fact... We would have benefited from more analysis, but we should be part of the solution, not the problem (YouTube, 2018).

Then according to ambassador al-Maliki, this move was clearly within the scope of international law pursuant to a policy move to the creation of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Semana, 2018b), something American President Donald Trump suggested in a somewhat oblique reference in an address to the UN's General Assembly in New York (White House, 2018). Colombia has thus positioned itself in a triangular vortex between Israel, the United States and itself. To be sure, Duque has sought to establish Colombia as a political leader on the continent, contending the leftist orientation of neighboring Venezuela and distancing the country from the traditional influence of the United States.¹ But there is little doubt that Colombia's recognition of the State of Palestine will have serious repercussions in its diplomatic relations with Israel. This condition is certainly represented by the fact that the remainder of South American states who acted in a similar manner nearly nine years prior, except for Venezuela and Bolivia, have maintained their diplomatic contacts with Israel unnecessarily without repair. This is also evident in the case of the clear majority of countries that has made the same decision.

The most credible factor to the motivation of President Santos is, perhaps, related to his nomination and award of a Nobel

¹ Duque rejected the chairmanship of UNASUR (*Unión de Naciones Suramericanas*) when it was given to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, and withdrew from the organization entirely. UNASUR was reportedly a source of American hegemony (CNN, 2018; El Nacional, 2018; Aziz, 2018).

Peace Prize for his achievement in gaining a peace agreement with the Colombian insurgent group FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*). While there certainly was international support for the peace effort, at home there was considerable discord. Colombia as the sole outlier on the continent may have bent to the pure pressure from its neighbors, particularly on a human rights level because of the violent Israeli measures taken against Gaza protestors. It seems like retribution to former opposition leaders always remains an option for review. But, in fact, the law approved last July by the Knesset that defines Israel as the nation-state representing the Jewish people, with the repercussions for ethnical and religious minorities, was key in this decision-making (Gil, 2018). The intention was to support peace between Israel and Palestine and a negotiation process (El Tiempo, 2018).

Expanding the geographic context but maintaining the related subject matter in the Spanish-speaking western hemisphere, the Paraguayan government decided to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Paraguay, 2018a) in May 2018, a policy move only to be rescinded the following September. Paraguay's Foreign Minister, Luis Alberto Castiglioni, saw the move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem as "unilateral, visceral and without justification." Castiglioni said in a news conference that "Paraguay wants to contribute to an intensification of regional diplomatic efforts to achieve a broad, fair and lasting peace in the Middle East" (Desantis, 2018). The official Paraguayan announcement said that the action was "appropriate to re-establish the headquarters in its previous location... This measure is adopted in the meantime a broader approach to the subject can be achieved [sic.]" (Paraguay, 2018b), and was done in accordance with Article 143 to the national constitution. Notable was the response from the new Paraguayan President Mario Abdo Benítez (grandson of a Lebanese immigrant) who expressed his opposition to the rescindment even before taking office on August 15.

The Paraguayan decision was made according to two widely different perspectives: one, Paraguay displayed a sense of petulance as a belief that the Israelis failed to show proper deference toward Paraguay for its favorable actions toward Israel (Eichner, 2018) and two, Palestinians, along with Arab allies, put considerable pressure on Paraguay to rescind its decision with a promise of substantial investments (Levi and Eichner, 2018). Israel, thereupon, responded by closing down its embassy in Asuncion (Israel, 2018; JTA, 2018). But upon careful reflection, there are other potential explanations. The decision made by the outgoing administration of President Horacio Manuel Cortes Jara was done with no consultation with the incoming administration. Also, but perhaps, due to the strong relationship as a fellow businessman President Cortes had with President Trump and the American decision to the similar move of its embassy to Jerusalem. There is a matter to be considered: Paraguay has long considered a state that respected international law. So that when the issue emerged before the United Nations Security Council when the

United States decided to move its embassy to Jerusalem,² bringing about a condemnation by the UN General Assembly by a vote of 128 in favor, 9 against, but with Paraguay abstaining (UN, 2017b).

The question remains why, one, Colombia changed its long-time position and recognized the State of Palestine; two, Paraguay moved its Israeli embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem; and three, why Paraguay rescinded its decision on the embassy move? Without the availability of explanatory official statements, save for the brief notification announcements, speculation becomes a ready subject for observers.

There is one common factor to the action taken by both states, Colombia and Paraguay: The crucial decisions were taken soon after there was a change in the head of the respective regimes. Both states had reasonably strong diplomatic and economic relations with Israel and had no reason to poke a stick in the eye of the United States. In both cases, one could argue that the actions taken were to assuage Palestinian interests. Now, taking into account the American position on the Palestinians³ and its historic relationship to South America, there is a complex of contradictions.

We can argue that Colombia's decision with regard to recognizing a Palestinian state does not mean a radical change on its foreign policy towards the Middle East and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in recent years. Recognition of Palestine was a significant deed and was coherent with the historical behavior of Colombia in this regard, but is very likely that President Duque is going to maintain the special relation with Israel, in some kind of realignment in the space of the triangular vortex we mentioned.

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² UN General Assembly Resolution ES-10/L. (UN, 222017a)

³ The PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) office in Washington, DC was forced to close its doors (State, 2018); moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (State, 2018); and removed its financial support for the Palestinians through UNRWA (United Nations Relief Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East) (State, 2018).

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