

Agreement Promotes Mutual Cultural Understanding Between Arabs and Brazilians

Contributed by Marina Sarruf
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A memorandum of cooperation to promote and disclose cultural activities about the Arab world and the Ibero-American countries in Brazil was signed this Friday, November 14, in Rio de Janeiro, between the Ibero-American secretary general, Enrique Iglesias, and the director of the Library and Center of South American and Arab Research (BibliAspa), Paulo Daniel Farah.

"The memorandum is to promote a series of academic, literary and artistic activities, as well as publications," stated Farah.

The agreement was signed after the last day of seminar "The Arab Contribution to Ibero-American Identities", promoted by the Arab House, from Spain, the Ibero-American Secretariat General (SEGIB) and BibliAspa.

According to Farah, the seminar is already one of the actions promoted by the BibliAspa and SEGIB. Another action being developed in partnership between both organizations is the publication about Arab and Ibero-American studies. "This publication has come to crown this cooperation that was already in existence," he added.

During the seminar, the idea of promoting a new academic seminar to proceed with the debates was discussed. "We have noticed that there is still much to do to work the alliances between the civilizations," said Iglesias, who praised the event and also said that he learnt more about the Arab contribution to Ibero-America.

According to Farah, the seminar was a great success. "In a general manner it may be observed that the Arab presence in Latin America was fundamental for the formation and construction of the Latin-American identities," he said. One of the points made by the director was that the Arabs participated actively in these contributions together with the Africans, Indians, Italians, Japanese and Germans.

"Another positive factor is generating a little awareness about the Arab participation in specific areas. The congress demystified that among the Arabs there was not significant intellectual production. The production of knowledge and arts of the Arabs was and is still fundamental for Latin America, without forgetting the economic, social and political contributions," said Farah.

To the undersecretary for political affairs at the Brazilian Foreign Office, Gilberto Jaguaribe, closer ties with the Arab world are fundamental for the Brazilian foreign policy. "The most relevant element in foreign relations is cultural," said Jaguaribe, who also participated in the closing of the event.

In the last day of the seminar, the talkers spoke about how the Arabs are seen in Latin America and vice-versa. One of the themes covered by Mexican anthropologist Camila Pastor, of the University of California, in Los Angeles, was the question of Arab women as dancers.

"Immigrant (Arab) women to Latin America transmit the image of being exotic, sexy women," she said, and recalled singer Shakira, a Colombian of Lebanese descent. According to her, the Arab theme in Latin America is, many times, sold in an erotic way. "Here we find another Arab connotation to sell," said Camila.

Another speaker who spoke about the stereotype of the Arabs was Zidane Zeraoui, of the Technological and Higher Study Institute of Monterrey. "There is much more Arab presence in Latin America than the contrary. In the Arab world there is lack of knowledge of Latin America. The ties are few," he said.

Zeraoui mentioned as examples Mexico, which is still seen by the Arabs as a country of the time of the Mexican Revolution. "The image of Latin America in the Arab world is one of poverty, violence," he added.

To speak about the vision that the Arabs have of Latin America, the correspondent of Al-Jazeera television in Venezuela, Dima Khatib, showed an informal study she prepared for the seminar.

The first question covered was the reaction to the world America, which, to the Arabs, is related to the United States. On making this distinction, the first image that the Arabs have of the Latin American countries is one of football, poverty, drug trafficking, Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez, Pelé and Diego Maradona.

"The Arabs don't study much about Latin America in school," he said.

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