

## Getting Brazil Close to Arabs Is a Lula's Pet Project

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The South America - Arab Countries Summit crowns two years of mutual efforts to approximate the two regions. Relations between Brazil and the Middle East grew more intense after President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's visit to Syria, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Libya in December, 2003.

Commercial agreements were signed at that time, and seminars were held on investment and business opportunities.

The last trip by a Brazilian head of state had been in 1876, when Emperor Don Pedro II paid an unofficial visit to Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.

More than a century later, in 2003, prior to the presidential mission to the Arab countries, Brazil became the first Latin American observer at the Arab League, and President Lula was the first Brazilian head of state to attend a meeting of the organization.

Still in 2003, the Prime Minister of Lebanon, Rafik Hariri, came to Brazil, at which time the decision was made to establish a high-level bilateral commission to expand commercial exchanges.

Last year Brazil hosted two events intended to identify potential areas of exchange with the Arabs.

One was a seminar on Arab culture, in São Paulo. The other was a seminar on Scientific and Technical Cooperation between South America and the Arab Countries on Semi-Arid Regions and the Management of Water Resources, which brought together specialists from 13 countries in the northeastern Brazilian city of Fortaleza.

In 2004, Brazil also opened an office of representation in Ramalah, Palestine, and named a Special Ambassador for Middle Eastern affairs, in order to play a more active part in international efforts to advance the peace process in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian nation.

The initiatives to intensify relations between Brazil and the Middle East continued this year. In February, Brazil's Minister of Foreign Relations, Celso Amorim, visited 10 Arab countries.

In March, he participated in the 17th Arab League Summit, in Algiers. And in April, Brazil received the first visit of a Secretary-General of the Arab League, Ambassador Amre Moussa.

Cultural, political, and commercial motives justify Brazil's interest in intensifying its relations with the Middle East. Brazil possesses the world's largest community of Arab descendants outside of the Arab world - over ten million Brazilians have ancestors from the region.

In the economic sphere, the possibilities for increasing trade are great, as Brazil still supplies only 2% of the US\$ 239 billion in goods imported from all over the world by the Arabs.

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