

# Ambassador's Mission: To Bring Back the Good Old Times to Brazil-Iraq Relations

Contributed by Alexandre Rocha  
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Brazil's Federal Senate approved last week the indication of the diplomat Bernardo de Azevedo Brito as the new ambassador of Iraq. He is one of the most experienced at the Itamaraty, the Brazilian Foreign Office, and will have the mission of making relations between the two countries go back to having the strength they had in the past.

"We're already starting, we're retaking a stand that was once important and can go back to being important," he told reporters recently.

In fact, if global trade between the two countries was at US\$ 572.5 million last year, it was of nearly US\$ 2.5 billion in 1985, according to information from the Foreign Trade Secretariat (Secex) at the federal government. In the mid 1980s, Brazilian exports to the Arab country reached US\$ 630 million per year, against US\$ 50 million registered in 2005.

And Azevedo Brito is the man to do it. He has accumulated the experience of a pioneer in his curriculum. He started his diplomatic career in 1958 and was responsible for opening many embassies, like in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Namibia, and most recently a Brazilian Representation Office in Ramallah, on the West Bank.

"I consider Palestine, from the personal and professional point of view, a good introduction for comprehending the region, its problems, anxieties, frustrations and also its accomplishments," he stated.

The diplomat has also taken the position as the Ambassador of Finland and executive director for the United Nations World Food Programme (UNWFP). Read below the main parts of the interview.

How was your nomination?

This responds to the decision of the Brazilian government of reactivating the embassy, which will be done in a progressive manner. We will start working from Amman, in Jordan, but this will be an initial phase with trips to Baghdad as frequent and as long as the circumstances allow. The aim is to ensure the physical presence in Baghdad as soon as it is possible, in viable safety conditions.

The reason, of course, is that Brazil once had in the past very important trade relations with Iraq, which is a country of great expression in the region. It is a great oil producer, has a significant population, a past of relations with Brazil and, therefore, we are trying to go back to having this presence, giving it new dynamism.

Do you have a stronger area of action?

The greatest part of my career was centered on economic and development matters. More towards the end, in the cases of Austral Africa and Palestine above all, there was a greater political focus. But my major concern has always been with economic development and trade relations.

Is there a schedule to know effectively when you will be in Baghdad?

It is very difficult to be more precise as to this particular aspect, because only after the first trips and studies will it be possible to verify the necessary logistics. Other countries are already operating over there, but we have to see at what cost, financial and other. This is an answer, therefore, that I cannot give now, as it will depend on the studies to be done. It can be both relatively quick, as it can take a while. After the first stays in Baghdad, I hope to be able to make an evaluation I can send to my superiors. In the beginning there will be comings and goings to Baghdad, which doesn't stop meetings from being organized in Amman with companies wishing to expand their commercial presence in Iraq.

Is there some kind of action that the companies have to take to participate in the reconstruction of Iraq, which the Itamaraty believes should be taken?

The Brazilian government is already taking this initiative. The fair held in Amman last year had this purpose, and the measure itself of designating an ambassador, with the idea of reactivating the embassy in Baghdad, represents a new gesture which will translate as support to the initiatives by Brazilian companies that are looking for space in the Iraqi market. Other countries are doing the same thing.

From what I could observe, many Brazilian companies are interested in retaking or expanding their contacts in Iraq. Brazil has a traditional presence in Iraq and the Arab country may offer an expressive demand for Brazilian products. We won't be starting, therefore, but retaking a presence that has been important, and that can go back to being important.

Is there some advice for the companies not to lose the moment?

In spite of the difficulties, the normalization of trade and economic life is advancing. In the northern region of the country the situation is more stable, with business being carried out. The statistics available in the moment do not clearly indicate, however, how much Brazil is exporting to Iraq, since, in fact, exports are also going through indirect ways.

Brazil has numerous products, highly competitive, of which Iraq is in need. I am optimistic, but we have to go slowly, understand reality, see the new channels of trade. But knowing always there is a great likeness for Brazil, not only in Iraq, but throughout the Arab world.

I was a witness of this in Palestine, where I always found open doors for contacts made in the name of Brazil. Friendship by the Palestinian people, and the Arab people in general, helped me a lot in accomplishing my mission. This will also be an extremely favorable factor for my new mission.

Which competitive products could you mention?

All foodstuff products, like meats, hospital and dentistry equipments, transportation equipment, construction services. These are only some examples. It is the government's role to help identify the areas of interest, but we cannot substitute the private sector.

And in this sense what is the role that the Arab Brazilian Chamber of Commerce can carry out?

The Arab Chamber may be of great usefulness in promoting the opportunities, the trade channels, the reality that starts taking shape. It has all the means for this. It is a motivation for me to be sure of counting on the Chamber for supporting my work.

How can your experience in Ramallah help now in Iraq?

This is a region with interconnected problems. Of course that the Palestinian matter is very different to the problem Iraq is facing at this moment, but comprehension of the region as a whole is important.

I consider Palestine a good introduction to understanding the region, its problems, anxieties, frustrations, which are many, but also its accomplishments.

For example, in spite of all the difficulties of an occupied land, I was impressed with the great effort by the Palestinians in the education sector. It is admirable to see how a suffered people as them, for whom I have great respect, is concerned about educating their new generations.

And what are the initiatives you have planned to start off?

There are so many: first to see the reality, which countries are operating in the market, who are our competitors, where and how have they been working. See, on the Iraqi side, which are the most consolidated trade channels. This restart is delicate and it is necessary to conduct it carefully.

A little bit of patience is required. A good restart will be the best assurance of a safe way in the future, be it in terms of relations between governments, be it in terms of an increasingly importance presence of Brazilian companies in the Iraqi market.

But do you believe that Brazil may become a privileged trade partner?

I have no doubts that Brazil is in conditions of developing an important trade relation with Iraq, but to precise this in quantitative terms is hard, at least for now. Brazil is a country of numerous competitive products, and I mentioned some. Let's see how things will develop.

And in the social and humanitarian fields, what can Brazil do?

For example, I would like to develop a Brazilian presence in technical formation, in relation even to the expanding commercial relations. Brazil has great experience in this and has been contributing in an effective manner in many developing countries. Thus I presume that, also in Iraq, it is possible to do something in the field of professional formation.

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