

Chile and Palestine

A Long-Lasting Friendship



By Francisco J. Bernales

The long-standing links between Chile and Palestine go back to the early twentieth century, when the first immigrants started to arrive in our country. Since they travelled with a passport issued by the Ottoman Empire, they became known as Turks. Today it is believed that their descendants number close to 400,000. Although it was not always easy at the beginning, today Palestinians are well integrated into the Chilean social fabric as successful businesspeople, members of parliament, ministers, ambassadors, priests, to mention only some activities and professions. One remarkable fact is that most of these Palestinians were originally from Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour. It is said that there are more Beit Jalans in Chile than in Palestine!

Official bilateral relations are close and constructive. Chile was the first Latin American nation to open a representative office in Ramallah as far back as 1998. Since then, five chiefs of mission have represented Chile in Ramallah. In my case, I was honored to be appointed as the first full ambassador to the State of Palestine, i.e., instead of "representative," which is an acknowledgment of the closeness of the relations. On the other hand, in 1994 a Palestinian embassy was established in Santiago.

Chile recognized Palestine in January 2011, and was a staunch advocate and sponsor of UN Resolution 67/19, which granted Palestine non-Member Observer State status in that world forum. Historically,



Many residents of Beit Jala immigrated to Chile in the early 1900s.

Chile has supported the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people as well as the right to establish an independent state, coexisting in peace with Israel.

The former president of Chile, Sebastian Piñera, visited Ramallah in March 2011. It constituted the first official trip of a Chilean chief of state to Palestine. In addition, President Mahmoud Abbas went to Chile twice, in May 2005 and November 2009. Apart from these high-profile trips, delegations from the Chilean parliament have also been to Ramallah, and a mission of the Palestine Social Affairs Ministry, headed by its vice minister, went to Chile in October 2015, as did Dr. Mustafa Barghouti and Dr. Saeb Erekat, just to mention the most recent visits.

Among the most successful programs in bilateral relations are medical/surgical missions that provide services to children in the West Bank and Gaza. They come under the agreement signed between the ministries of health of both

countries and are financed by the NGO Palestine Children's Relief Fund (PCRF).

In the cultural field, Chile participated in the First Ibero-American Film Festival (2014), and a piano and flute duet performed well-known Chilean folkloric songs at Bethlehem University. The recent constitution of the Palestinian-Chilean Community, gathering people from Beit Sahour, Bethlehem, and Beit Jala, exemplifies the strong roots that still exist between our two countries.

In sports, the Club Deportivo Palestino is worth mentioning. It is a professional soccer club, based in Santiago de Chile, which was founded by a group of Palestinian immigrants in 1920. It plays in the Primera División de Chile, and its home games take place at the Estadio Municipal de la Cisterna that can accommodate up to 12,000 spectators.

On a personal note, the two and a half years that I have spent in Palestine have been extraordinary and will remain forever in my memory! The



Ambassador Francisco Bernales at the Chilean National Day celebration in Ramallah.

warm welcome extended to me at the official level as well as that offered by Palestinians from all walks of life has been remarkable. Strolling along the streets of Bethlehem or Beit Jala is very rewarding, because whenever I mention that I am from Chile I always receive the same comment: I have relatives there, my uncle lives there, my grandmother went there! Palestinian hospitality is overwhelming, not to mention the

stunning scenery with the beautiful and historic terraces, olive orchards, red poppies, and yellow marigolds that colorfully paint the magnificent rocky landscape during this beautiful spring. Could I ever forget this extraordinary land and people? I sincerely doubt it. Palestine will remain in my heart forever!

Francisco J. Bernales is ambassador of Chile to the State of Palestine.

Deportivo Palestino Club.

