

## Brazil and Iran must talk human rights

Brazil and Iran have called for UN reform, but President Lula has failed to press his new friend on another important issue



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The world must engage, not isolate Iran, in the push for Middle East peace, said Brazil's President Lula after a three-hour private meeting with his Iranian counterpart, President Ahmadinejad, on Monday.

Lula also said that Brazil supports Iran's rights to enjoy what he called "the benefits of fuel and technology". But he said Iran should negotiate with western nations for a "just and balanced" solution to concerns over its nuclear programme. The two leaders also issued a [joint call for reform of the United Nations](#).

Ahmadinejad became the first Iranian head of state to visit Brazil in 44 years and the trip was widely viewed as controversial. Originally scheduled for immediately after the presidential elections in Iran last June, it was postponed following the street protests that greeted the blatant rigging of this poll. However, Lula congratulated Ahmadinejad on his election "victory" and compared the protests to football fans whose side had lost a match. In September, he urged the west to stop pushing Iran over its nuclear programme and called for dialogue and engagement with Iran to foster peace.

The government of Israel lobbied hard against the visit and it was [met by widespread protests](#) by Jewish groups as well as by Brazilian human rights organisations. Last week Israel's president, Shimon Peres, [also came to Brazil](#) in what was officially billed as a trade mission but widely seen as an attempt to upstage Ahmadinejad's visit. A press release expressed Israel's concern at what it described as "Iranian infiltration" in Latin America.

In an address to Brazil's Congress, Peres pleaded that, "There needs to be a voice against destruction and against terror, a clear voice. I know that Brazil rejects threats, destruction, rejects terror, and the clear voice of Brazil has a strong echo in the entire world. I don't want to argue about the president of Iran on Brazilian soil, but we think his policies are a global danger. The Iranian government is arming, is training terrorist movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah," he concluded. His visit included a trip to Argentina where Peres attended a memorial service for the victims of two bomb attacks, which killed over 100 people in the early 1990s and are widely believed to have been carried out by Iranian-backed Hezbollah. Iran's current minister for defence, [Ahmad Vahidi](#), is wanted for questioning by Interpol for his alleged role in the planning of this attack.

Iran has already forged close link with Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia. However, Lula is widely seen as more moderate than Chávez, and Morales and has helped to blunt some of Iran's wilder anti-US policies.

Brazil is currently enjoying its strongest period of economic growth in recent years and has been developing a far more assertive foreign policy. It has opened scores of new embassies across the world and is making a particular effort to forge closer economic and diplomatic links with Africa, Asia and the Middle East. It is also enjoying increasing influence as an effective leader of the G20 group of developing countries and has recently strengthened its role within the World Trade Organisation and in relation to the International Monetary Fund. It is just about to take up a rotating seat on the UN security council, which gives added importance to its foreign policy positions.

The Brazilian human rights group, Conectas called on the Brazilian government to raise

its concerns about human rights violations in Iran, both bilaterally during the visit, but also multilaterally at the UN. Brazil has abstained on resolutions criticising Iran's record in recent years and Conectas has said that a public vote for a resolution, which is expected to be tabled by the Canadian government next week, would send a strong signal to the Iranian authorities. Lucia Nader, the international relations co-ordinator of Conectas said: "We understand international diplomacy and the importance of dialogue, but Brazil must make its concerns about human rights in Iran known publicly as well as through private bilateral exchanges."

The Israeli government and its supporters have mounted a string of personalised attacks on human rights organisations in the aftermath of the Goldstone report on war crimes in Gaza, in a campaign which is probably weakening its longer-term interests and influence. There is no doubt who emerged as the winner from the latest round of diplomatic jousting between Israel and Iran in Brazil.

While Lula did make references to the promotion of human rights in his press conference his much stronger emphasis was on the need to seek allies in his quest for reform of global institutions. "We have argued for 15 years for changes at the United Nations and a reform of its security council ... so that decisions may be taken on the basis of current reality and not a political grouping formed in 1948," he concluded. Ahmadinejad was smiling broadly as he echoed him saying: "The governments of Iran and Brazil, including my friend Lula and I, are seeking to construct a world without hostility where there is no fear of war."

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