



Palestinians in Latin America: Between Assimilation and Long-Distance Nationalism

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Latin America is host to an estimated half-million people of Palestinian descent, the largest such population outside the Arab world. Migration to the region began in the late 1800s and peaked between 1900 and 1930, with surges around periods of war or economic crisis in Palestine. Predominantly the descendants of a pre-Nakba generation, mostly middle to upper-class Christians who are well-represented among political and business elites, Palestinians in Latin America do not easily fit into a national narrative shaped by the refugee experience. They have therefore held little interest for Palestinian historiography as they did not meet the criteria of “Palestinian-ness” as defined by a nationalist discourse centered on dispossession, denial, and statelessness. With a special focus on Chile,¹ this article presents a historical overview of the Palestinian émigré community in Latin America, shedding light on its diverse and dynamic identity politics.

Socio-Economic Trajectories

THE EARLY DECADES

ARAB EMIGRATION from Palestine to Latin America started in the late Ottoman period, with predominantly Christian immigrants from the Bethlehem region, Jerusalem, Taybeh, and Ramallah arriving as early as 1870. Because of their significance in Europe’s nascent Holy Land tourism trade, the towns in question witnessed a boom in demand for the religious handicrafts they produced and the concomitant emergence of a new class of merchants, especially in and around Bethlehem (including Bayt Jala and Bayt Sahur).

Initially, the merchants sought to expand their activities to Europe, especially France, but “Amreeka” rapidly became the new Eldorado. One of the primary reasons for crossing the Atlantic was to participate in the great international fairs that were held in the United States, as documented by Adnan Musallam, a Palestinian historian from Bethlehem. Palestinian merchants attended the International Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia, the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, and the Universal Exposition of St. Louis in 1904.² Some continued southward, going on to Mexico and Central America (mainly Honduras and El Salvador) or directly to Argentina.

Across Latin America, immigration officers categorized these Palestinians as *Turcos*, a catch-all administrative category for Ottoman passport holders from *Bilad al-Sham* (the Levant), whether they were Arabs, Armenians, Jews from Aleppo, or Greeks. Palestinian immigration made up a minuscule portion of the great waves of Ottoman migration that arrived to the New World in the 19th and early 20th centuries—some 1.2 million Ottoman citizens migrated to the Americas between 1860 and 1914.³ A feature common to almost all these Levantine migrants was their role as “middleman minorities,” a term used to describe groups whose ethnicity is intertwined with their primary activity as traders and merchants.⁴ They filled a void in Latin America where the retail trade was quite underdeveloped, the wealthy elites being *latifundistas* (large landowners) and *compradors* (buyers), but not merchants. With the overwhelming majority of the recently arrived immigrants starting out as itinerant salesmen, the word *Turco* rapidly became a synonym for peddler.

Turcos suffered from ethnic discrimination. Unlike European immigrants, they had not been invited by Latin American countries to occupy and farm vast portions of cultivable land. Arabs and Jews were particularly unwelcome among the *criollas* elites,⁵ whose discriminatory attitudes were modeled on the stereotypes of European racial ideologies.⁶ As for the rest of the population, they could not decide whether *Turcos* were white or not, and the term’s pejorative connotation was associated with these immigrants’ occupations as tradespeople and with their cultural customs rather than their putative racial category.⁷

Wherever they ended up, Palestinian merchants in Latin America started out peddling goods from door to door—a difficult, but lucrative job. Initially, they were selling religious handicrafts. Very quickly, however, they successfully expanded their business to other manufactured products, and most were able to open up their own shops within a few years. Merchants worked long hours and spent little or no money on consumption. Great emphasis was placed on thrift so that they could go back to Palestine with something to show for their years of hard work and absence. A number of émigrés returned to the home country as wealthy men, further fuelling the myth of the American Eldorado.

To avoid competition with other Arab immigrants, mostly Syrians and Lebanese who were more numerous and therefore had stronger community networks, Palestinians landing in Buenos Aires and São Paulo crossed the Andes *cordillera* to establish themselves in smaller countries farther from the major Atlantic ports. They began arriving in Chile around 1880, with some going on to Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador. This implicit strategy of non-competition between Arab networks, which was based on both solidarity and market saturation, explains why Syrians and Lebanese make up the majority of the Arab diaspora in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela—the largest countries of Latin America—while Palestinians outnumber other Levantine Arab immigrants in Chile, Peru, Honduras, and El Salvador.

Palestinian emigration gained momentum after 1908, and continued to do so in the 1920s. Following the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, a new military conscription law had come into effect making military service compulsory for all Ottoman subjects. Christian families were particularly concerned that their sons would serve as cannon fodder⁸ and they sent their male children off to Latin America where they had relatives. Many Muslim families would have done likewise, but lacked the transnational social capital (i.e., social networks overseas) and sometimes the economic resources to do so.⁹ Furthermore, with the onset of World War I, the economic situation in

Palestine deteriorated dramatically, creating a further motivation for leaving the home country. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, the well-known Palestinian author and literary critic who was born and raised in Bethlehem, describes in his boyhood memoir, *The First Well*, the state of abandon in which houses were left by families who had immigrated to Latin America.¹⁰ Thus, the push created by the fear of rising Turkish nationalism and religious persecution combined with the pull of economic opportunity marked the beginning of a “chain migration,” with nephews, brothers, cousins, and sometimes entire families leaving everything behind to join their relatives abroad. However, emigrants were not moved only by external factors. They sometimes had personal motivations for emigrating. The men were inspired to follow the pioneers’ paths in their westward migration to do business while the women came along mostly as daughters and spouses. And until the early 1930s, more than 90 percent of the marriages within the Palestinian community in Latin America were ethnically endogamous, that is, between Arabs.¹¹

The immigrants’ status as middleman minorities began to change in the 1930s. After the Wall Street crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression, the economies of Latin American countries underwent a transformation. The fall of the commodities market and the decline in Latin American exports worldwide forced political leaders to refocus their development strategies inward, with a sharp emphasis on import substitution. The new strategy called for developing domestically manufactured products, and therefore, required people with access to capital to start up industrial ventures. Few traditional landowners were interested in taking such risks, and capital-rich immigrant merchants became the natural partners of the nascent Latin American “developmental states.”¹²

The trajectory of Juan Yarur Lolas is a good example of such a partnership. Juan Yarur and his younger brother, Nicolas, left Palestine in 1902 for Latin America, where they already had relatives in Chile and in Bolivia. After a few years of peddling, the two brothers opened a shop, eventually starting a small textile plant in La Paz in 1929. In the mid-1930s, the Chilean government under President Arturo Alessandri (1932–1938) invited Juan Yarur to establish a larger operation in Santiago, offering him incentives that included no custom duties on imported machine tools, low tariffs on imported supplies, and a loan of more than one million U.S. dollars from the Banco de Chile, the country’s largest bank. The Yarur brothers accepted the generous deal and founded a cotton manufacturing company in 1936.¹³ By 1948, the plant employed more than 3,000 workers and produced 60 percent of the country’s cotton fabric, becoming the largest textile plant in Latin America.

According to the registers of Chile’s Syrian-Palestinian Commercial Association, 147 industrial plants were set up with “Arab funds” between 1933 and 1937, two-thirds of them in the textile or clothing industry. Similar projects sprang up in Honduras, albeit on a smaller scale. In 1930, for example, the first clothing brand in Central America was produced and registered by Jacobo Kattan.¹⁴ In both Chile and Honduras, the birth of these new industries accompanied the creation of private banks. Newly established manufacturers needed a financial infrastructure for their investments, and given the embryonic state of Latin American banking systems, Palestinian entrepreneurs set up their own investment banks.¹⁵ For example, Juan Yarur founded the Banco de Crédito e Inversiones (BCI), to this day one of the leading banks in Chile, in 1937, a year after he had established his textile plant.

SUCCESS, GROWTH AND ASSIMILATION

The émigré community's expanding economic activity inevitably led to a process of permanent settlement. In Santiago de Chile, an ethnic district emerged in Patronato, the site of the first Greek-Orthodox church built by the Palestinian community in 1917, around which grew a neighborhood of small sewing workshops, clothing stores, and the residences of first and second generation Palestinian immigrants. Gradually, small retailers and manufacturers joined the burgeoning middle classes, and it was from their ranks that professionals of Palestinian descent emerged. In Chile especially, the development of universities offered the aspiring middle class great opportunities. The children of these Palestinian émigrés were encouraged to go to university and obtain degrees in law, medicine, engineering, and other areas conducive to the liberal professions. By the 1940s, Palestinian immigrants who had become well-to-do started to buy bigger homes.

As early as the 1930s, middle-class professionals of Palestinian descent had begun to show an interest in politics,¹⁶ with the first congressman elected from their midst in the 1940s. But the key decade for politically-aspiring Palestinians in Chile was the 1950s, when two ministers of Palestinian descent representing the Agrarian Labor Party (PAL) served in the government of President Carlos Ibáñez; the best known of them was Rafael Tarud Siwady, the minister of economy and mining, nicknamed *El Turco Tarud*.¹⁷ However, the traditional and institutionalized parties—especially those on the right—were not eager to embrace the sons of Levantine immigrants. The rise of prominent politicians of Palestinian descent was made possible only by the upsurge of non-traditional and populist parties looking for fresh faces like the PAL.¹⁸

By the beginning of the 1970s, the Palestinian community in Chile was experiencing growing divisions. Over the decades, the socio-economic gap had widened and, even though they were still looked down upon as *Turco* nouveaux riches, the newly affluent industrialists had broken into the local bourgeoisies. Meanwhile, there was increasing political polarization between a new generation of left-leaning politicians of Palestinian descent and the industrialists who remained conservative, making political divisiveness in Chile particularly pronounced. This was in contrast to other Latin American countries such as Honduras, for example, where the communities of Palestinian descent had remained more homogeneous, both socially and politically. The 1970s and 1980s, decades of dramatic political turmoil in the context of the Cold War, ushered in a period of great transition for the Chilean émigré community.

In 1970, Salvador Allende, the candidate of a coalition of left-wing Chilean parties won the presidential election with a strong reformist agenda. Demanding self-management of industry and denouncing exploitation, workers began occupying their factories. Bowing to union pressure, the government moved to nationalize the country's industries, and because the textile sector was one of the most labor-intensive and its workers among the most unionized, nationalization began with the textile plants. The seizure of the Yarur factory in April 1971 marked the beginning of this tumultuous process, and the textile plants of the Sumar, Said, and Hirmas families soon followed. Meanwhile, the traditional Chilean bourgeoisie did nothing to try to save the sector. In fact, some were quietly satisfied to see the *Turcos* lose the wealth they had acquired so quickly.

In spite of such rivalries among the upper class, it should come as no surprise that industrialists of Palestinian descent were harsh opponents of the government of Salvador Allende. Some even

played a critical role in the September 1973 military coup against Allende's democratically-elected government. Juan and Alberto Kassis Sabag, for example, two brothers born in Bethlehem, received the dissident generals at their home only a few days before the coup.¹⁹ But there were also individuals of Palestinian descent who supported the Allende government and were condemned to exile after the coup, notably the film director, Miguel Littin, the poet and ambassador, Mahfúd Massis, and former minister Rafael Tarud, to name a few.

Augusto Pinochet's military government rapidly returned the textile factories to their owners. Paradoxically, however, the neoliberal turn of the regime was precisely what brought the textile industry to its knees. By 1975, production had fallen to two-thirds of its previous levels, as the liberalization policies put in place by Jorge Cauas Lama, the minister of economy—who was himself of Palestinian descent—pitted the industry against international competition. Most industrialists recovered from this sharp economic downturn by diversifying their investments and expanding to new sectors, in particular real estate, media, and retail. The best example is probably José Said Saffie, whose family began in the textile industry but who is today the main shareholder of the Said Group, a conglomerate that controls Chile's third largest shopping property management firm. Other industrialists focused on their banking activities, including (in Chile) the Yarurs (BCI), the Abumohors (Corpbanca), and the Rishmagues (Union Credit Bank), with Palestinian industrialists in other Latin American countries also expanding their scope of activity, though to a less dramatic extent than in Chile.

Like Chile, Honduras was also on a right-wing drift. In the 1980s, it escaped the violence that affected neighboring countries such as Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, and it even served as a base for the U.S.-sponsored Contras fighting the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. The pervasive anti-communist ideological climate and the weakness of pro-guerrilla movements in Honduras prevented the emergence of left-wing leaders of Palestinian descent like Schafik Handal, the historic leader of the Salvadoran guerrilla movement, or Moisés Hassan, one of the prominent figures of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas.²⁰ On the contrary, Palestinian industrialists strongly supported the country's "anti-subversion" policy in the 1980s. The richest man in Honduras today, Miguel Facussé, spearheaded this movement, and Honduran businessmen of Palestinian descent who continue to be virulently anti-communist strongly supported the ousting of President Manuel Zelaya in 2009. In the context of the country's political tension and violence, their stance has led to a resurgence of anti-Turco and anti-Palestinian feelings, as some sectors of the working class perceive them as the "powerful owners" of the country. Not all Hondurans of Palestinian origin are wealthy, of course, but the concentration of capital in the hands of industrialists of Palestinian descent raises their profile. Conversely, there is too much socio-economic diversity among Chile's large émigré population for Chileans of Palestinian descent to be associated with only one social class.

Shifting Identity and the Relationship to Palestinian Nationalism

THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS

Until the 1920s, immigrants from Palestine had recognized four major loci of identity: their home-towns (Bethlehem, Bayt Jala, Bayt Sahur, etc.); their region (*Bilad al-Sham*); their religion

(Christianity), including, more broadly, their consciousness of coming from what was commonly referred to as the Holy Land; and, lastly, their “Arab-ness.” Identification with the Ottoman Empire was almost non-existent,²¹ and although there was a smattering of references to Palestine, these were rare. Beginning in the 1920s, however, Palestinian-ness began to emerge as a more salient identity. The Club Deportivo Palestino, a professional soccer club, was founded in Santiago de Chile in 1920. In addition to incorporating Palestine into their name, the colors of the team’s soccer jerseys were those of the Palestinian flag: red, black, green, and white. This nascent identification with Palestinian nationalism went on to gain such momentum that dozens of organizations directly referencing Palestine²² were founded all across Latin America between 1924 and 1939.

The rise of Palestinian consciousness after the mid-1920s may have been due to the establishment of Britain’s mandate over Palestine, which complicated the lives of the émigrés immensely. Traditionally, Latin American Palestinians had moved back and forth between their host countries and Palestine with ease, and it was common for émigrés to return to the home country for a few years and then to go back to Latin America. Now, under the Mandate, whether they were trying to visit Palestine temporarily or to return permanently, they faced considerable obstacles, making them more aware of the political precariousness of their homeland.

During the Ottoman era, Palestinian émigrés who had kept their Ottoman nationality were able to return to Palestine legally, but this situation changed in 1925 when the British Mandate government began issuing Palestine passports in keeping with its new citizenship law. Henceforth, immigrants who had acquired citizenship in their host countries needed a visa—obtained on the basis of their new citizenship—in order to enter Palestine, a process whose outcome was far from certain. Those who had not obtained citizenship in their host countries had to apply for the Palestinian nationality itself. However, the conditions for obtaining the nationality, as defined by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne (which formally dissolved the Ottoman Empire) and incorporated in the Mandate’s 1925 Palestine Citizenship Order, were exceedingly difficult to meet.²³ Indeed, the barriers Palestinian-born Arab émigrés faced in obtaining Palestinian citizenship are clear from the small number of persons born in Palestine and residing abroad who managed to obtain Palestinian nationality. By 1946, their number had reached a total of 465.²⁴ Ironically, over the same period (i.e., between 1920 and 1945),²⁵ more than 300,000 Jews, mainly from Europe, were able to migrate to Palestine, revealing the essence of Mandate policy on immigration and its political project for the region.

It was not only to obtain visas for travel to Palestine that the émigrés needed the Palestinian nationality. In some cases, their inability to provide valid citizenship papers prevented them from renewing their residency permits in the host countries and even from being eligible for naturalization. This was especially true of Mexico and Chile, where thousands of Palestinian émigrés were left stateless as a result of the changes that grew out of the Lausanne Treaty and the new Mandate laws. In other cases, such as that of El Salvador, the absence of citizenship barred immigrants from conducting business, thus jeopardizing the main source of livelihood for Palestinians in that country. In the face of such difficulties, the émigrés organized themselves to make their grievances heard. Dozens of complaints were brought before the British consulates of Latin America (which remain deposited in the League of Nations archives to this day). Petitioners

argued that they still owned land in Palestine and that despite having businesses in their host countries, they still planned to return home in the near future. In Palestine itself, the emigrants received the support of young nationalists such as ‘Issa al-Bandak, who in 1927 launched The Committee for the Defense of Immigrants Rights to Palestinian Citizenship. The Committee collected the grievances of emigrants and delivered them to the British High Commissioner for Palestine. The British relaxed the citizenship rules slightly, but to little effect. Following the outbreak of the Great Palestinian Revolt of 1936–39, ‘Issa al-Bandak renewed his petition to the Peel Commission, which had been appointed to look into the causes of the rebellion, again without significant results. The virtual impossibility of obtaining citizenship dissuaded many emigrants from even trying. Palestinian nationality would eventually disappear altogether with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, but those who had attempted to obtain a passport undoubtedly had their first political experience of “Palestinian-ness.” And even if they failed to obtain citizenship, their struggle to claim or reclaim their nationality was in itself meaningful.

In parallel, the decade of the 1930s witnessed the development of a dynamic nationalist ethnic press in Latin America covering political events in Palestine. Among the most notable examples were *Al Islah* (reform), published in Chile from 1930 to 1942 (and also distributed in Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador), and *Rumbos*, founded in Honduras in 1939. A good example of the impact of these newspapers, which emphasized a belonging to the Palestinian nation, was their success in spearheading the collection of funds among the Chilean and Honduran communities for the families of martyrs of the 1936–39 Arab Revolt. While these publications expressed an increasing identification with Palestine, it is significant that much of the ethnic press was written in Spanish, a clear sign that the communities were settled in their host countries. The second generation, born in Latin America, was already losing its ability to read and write Arabic.

The last significant “nationalist” event of this period was the mobilization in Latin America against the partition of Palestine, which was to be voted on by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in November 1947. In fact, the mobilization was the result of a last-minute campaign headed by the prominent intellectual and nationalist activist, Akram Zuaiter, who came from Palestine to convince Latin American leaders not to vote in favor of partition.²⁶ Thanks to the strong mobilization of their Palestinian communities, Chile, El Salvador, and Honduras did in fact abstain from voting on the UNGA resolution partitioning Palestine.²⁷

THE MIDDLE PERIOD: 1948–1970

The decades that followed witnessed the deepening cultural assimilation of Palestinian and Arab immigrants in Latin America. By 1970, exogamous marriages—in this context, marriages between Arabs and non-Arabs—had become the norm. The new generations, whose parents had emigrated from Palestine, were now Chilean, Honduran, Peruvian, and so on. They were never considered Palestinian-Chilean or Palestinian-Honduran (the way one can be Arab-American) but rather Latin Americans of Palestinian descent. Hyphenated identities do not exist in the multi-racial, multi-ethnic societies of Latin America; national identification comes first. Nevertheless, identification with Palestine survived through networks of friends, families, and business partners, through social clubs, like the Estadio Palestino in Santiago²⁸ or the Club Hondureño Arabe in San Pedro Sula,²⁹ and through food, an element of cultural identity that may

not be visible in the public sphere but is very much alive in the private one. While less powerful than language and religion, food as a socio-cultural practice embodied an emotional connection with the homeland.

At the same time, with the Nakba, the end of Palestine as a political entity, and the accelerating process of assimilation in the host countries, the “Palestinian question” receded from the public arena in the 1950s.³⁰ This is not surprising, since the Nakba had greatly reinforced the option of non-return, even though, as discussed above, British policy had already largely closed that window during the Mandate period. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the 1960s, interest in the issue appeared to resurface, spurred by the emergence of a generation of Chilean intellectuals of Palestinian descent and the arrival of new immigrants from the old country. In 1963, a member of the Chilean congress, Juan Tuma, made a speech commemorating the Nakba at the Chilean House of Representatives. In March 1964, the Chilean poet of Palestinian descent, Mahfúd Massis, and Fuad Habash, an Arabic teacher from Jerusalem who had recently arrived in Chile after four years in Jordanian prison (presumably for his communist beliefs), founded the Front for the Liberation of Palestine (FRELIPA). The organization had its own newspaper, *Palestina Patria Martir*, to which Habash was able to contribute the experience he had gained running the radio program “La Voz de Palestina” since 1962.³¹ Their efforts, however, had limited results. The majority of the community was not really interested in the politics of Palestine, and the powerful business class was frankly frightened by the manifestation of leftist and anti-imperialist aspects of Arab and Palestinian nationalism in Chile. When the first delegation of the PLO, created only two years earlier under Arab League auspices, arrived in Chile in 1966, the Palestinian officials met with FRELIPA’s few members, but the visit failed to spark the interest they had expected within the broader community. Their objective had been to secure three members of the community to represent the Palestinians of Latin America at the Palestine National Council (PNC), established by the PLO as the parliament for Palestinians worldwide. In addition to participating in the PNC, Palestinians from Honduras, Bolivia, Peru, and Brazil also organized the first Palestinian congress in Latin America, a pioneering but short-lived attempt to bring together representatives of Palestinian émigré communities on the continent.³²

NATIONALISM REAWAKENED

Unlike in North America, where the impetus for an ethno-political awakening of the Arab diaspora was provided by the June 1967 war,³³ for Latin America the key moment was the recognition of the PLO as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people” by the United Nations in 1974. This development allowed the PLO to open information offices across the continent (1975 in Brazil, 1976 in Cuba, 1979 in Peru) and to develop a network of representatives. Re-politicizing the diaspora was part of their mission, but their objective was financial as much as it was political, as they solicited funds from the wealthiest businessmen.

The Palestine Information Office in Chile opened in 1978, during the rule of the Pinochet military dictatorship. The first years were not easy. The “Palestinian revolution” powerfully echoed the political struggles of the left in Latin America, with some individuals within the community denouncing fellow Palestinian Club members to the Chilean political police. The PLO was viewed by many as subversive, especially in light of the international strategy pursued by

some of its factions, notably the hijackings pioneered by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). A member of the PFLP, Jael al-Arja, who had been a regular visitor to the émigré community in Latin America since the early 1970s, was one of those killed in the 1976 Entebbe Operation, when the Israelis stormed an Air France aircraft hijacked by the PFLP. Palestinians in Chile who had known al-Arja were left terrified.

The PLO was concerned that actions by member organizations were undermining its image and impeding its efforts in Chile and other Latin American countries. In an effort to remedy the situation, it sent Father Ibrahim Ayad, a Catholic priest born in Bayt Sahur and a close advisor to Yasir Arafat, to try to improve the PLO's standing among the mostly Christian community of Palestinian descent. It was only in the wake of the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres in Lebanon, however, that the community was able to come together. The slaughter of hundreds in the two Palestinian refugee camps provoked an emotion that transcended the community's earlier divisions, and in Chile, fostered the first demonstration of unity among Palestinians.

In 1984, the Palestinian Club of Chile and the Federation of Brazilian-Palestinian Associations called for holding the first PLO-backed congress of Palestinian organizations from Latin America and the Caribbean. The congress took place in São Paulo, and resulted in the creation of the Confederation of Palestinian Communities of Latin America and the Caribbean (Confederación Palestina de América Latina y del Caribe, COPLAC). Eleven representatives from Latin America were selected as delegates to the PNC. This newly-established institutional connection with the PLO was especially helpful in motivating the young. Many of them joined Sana'ud, a transnational cultural movement created by the PLO for young people of Palestinian descent to reconnect with Palestinian culture, and dozens of *dabke* dance troupes were formed in Brazil, Chile, and other Latin American countries. In Chile, university students went even further and founded GUPS-Chile, the local branch of the decades-old General Union of Palestinian Students.

In Honduras, the youth of Palestinian descent were not politicized in the same way, both because of the economic status of Honduran-Palestinians and the regional political context of the 1980s. The Honduran business class of Palestinian descent felt very uncomfortable with the PLO's close political relations with Nicaragua's leftist guerrilla movement. By an irony of history, at around the same time as the Sabra and Shatila massacre, a Honduran guerrilla group close to the Sandinistas held about 100 people hostage, including three top officials of the Honduran government, in the Chamber of Commerce building of San Pedro Sula. Many businessmen of Palestinian descent were among them, including Emilio Jaar and Taufik Canahuati. This incident prevented significant mobilization against the massacres in Lebanon and closed the door to strengthening the relationship between the Palestinian community and the PLO. Until 2011, when the Honduran government recognized the State of Palestine, any reference to the Palestinian cause was still stigmatized within the community.

Chile continues to be the country with the best organized and most active group of individuals of Palestinian descent working on the question of Palestine, and with the onset of the twenty-first century began the process of professionalizing the pro-Palestinian movement. Palestinian-Chilean politicians can be found across the political spectrum from the right to

the Communist Party, but when it comes to Palestine, they cooperate. Today, the Palestinian-Chilean parliamentary group they created is the largest of the binational groups in the Chilean congress. In 2001, wealthy Chilean-Palestinian businessmen created the Palestine Bethlehem 2000 Foundation, a charity organization that provides relief for children in Palestine and also engages in political lobbying and offers cultural programs to the community in Chile. The foundation publishes a monthly magazine called *Al Damir*, which highlights success stories of Chileans of Palestinian descent and provides briefings about the activities of the community and the humanitarian situation in Palestine. There is also a Palestinian-Chilean news agency as well as two other websites that provide daily updates and op-eds regarding the situation in Palestine. These are the main sources of information for Palestinian-Chileans as well as others who are interested in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Political divisions and disagreements still exist within and among the diaspora organizations, but these do not hamper their work or their impact. There is clearly a growing interest among the youth about their Palestinian origins. The Internet, social networks, and the possibility of traveling to Palestine have facilitated this reconnection, even if very few still have close relatives there. The biggest problem today is probably the difficulty of entering Palestine, as Israeli authorities tend to discriminate against visitors of Palestinian ancestry. In the last five years, four Chilean young women have been deported from Tel Aviv or the Allenby Bridge because of their Palestinian surnames.

Palestinian Diaspora or Immigrant Community?

Today, Palestinians in Latin America are a highly active minority, both culturally and politically. Most have only a loose connection with Palestine—a surname, a family memory, some culinary practices. Do they still qualify as Palestinians? They probably do because they can revive their Palestinian connection if and when the circumstances are favorable. Identities are fluid, which is why the issue of numbers—such as the claim that over 350,000 persons of Palestinian descent live in Chile—is complicated. This number may be a key demographic indicator, but it certainly does not tell the entire, nuanced story of identity. As the history outlined above indicates, Latin Americans of Palestinian descent have revived Palestine many times in their century-long presence on the American continent.

Diasporas can be defined as transnational social arrangements binding individuals who share an ancestral cultural and geographical origin, whether real or imagined. What differentiates a diaspora from an immigrant community, then, is the passage of time and the existence of multiple generations.³⁴ In addition, and in accordance with the view of French geographer Emmanuel Ma Mung, a diaspora must show a multi-polar dispersion as well as an inter-polarity of relationships (i.e., relationships between the various poles or parts of the diaspora).³⁵ In the context of this discussion, such a perspective is much more useful than the rigid reifications that characterize diasporas as “ethnic groups” with objective frontiers. In the words of social theorist Rogers Brubaker, diasporas can be regarded as “an idiom, a stance,” a category of practice that is “used to make claims, to articulate energies, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, and to appeal to loyalties.”³⁶

The idea of a Palestinian diaspora raises a whole host of issues. First of all, in Arabic, the word diaspora does not exist. Depending on the context, different words are used to refer to the Palestinian experience, *shatat* (dispersal) probably being the most common. Additionally, the term Palestinian diaspora is sometimes regarded as a term mirroring the Jewish experience, the aim being to evoke the notion of disaster as the word Nakba does.³⁷ For others, the term diaspora is construed as implying the Palestinians' renunciation of the right of return and acceptance of *tawtin* (permanent settlement) in host countries—a highly controversial issue, especially for Palestinian refugees in the Middle East.³⁸ Political scientists such as Bassma Kodmani-Darwish, for example, contend that diasporization (which she defines as permanent settlement in host countries),³⁹ is what the future holds for refugees, making the final status dimension of the Oslo accords all the more critical, as the refugee question lies at the very heart of such a settlement.

Certainly, there is an argument to be made for the notion of diaspora not being applicable to Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, given the time-frame involved—their expulsion from Palestine being relatively recent—and their legal status.⁴⁰ By contrast, the notion of diaspora is particularly relevant when it comes to Palestinians in Latin America as it helps to explain the dynamics of permanent reactivation of the myth of origins.

As for the question of return in the construction of their identity, the idea has none of the resonance or significance for Palestinians in Latin America as it does for refugees scattered around Middle Eastern countries. In Latin America, Palestinians are citizens of their countries of residence—with which they also fully identify as nationals—and a process of massive return to a future state of Palestine is not seen as an urgent priority. There may be a desire on the part of some individuals to go back to Palestine for personal reasons that range from identity to political aspirations, and many more young Latin Americans of Palestinian descent would probably travel to Palestine if the Israeli authorities made it easier for foreigners to live in the occupied territories. In summary, there is a great diversity in the situation of expatriated Palestinians, and we should employ the same variety of lexicon to capture the current spatial, social, legal, and subjective realities of Palestinians outside their homeland.

Today, Palestinians in Latin America are part of all major international campaigns undertaken by Palestinian organizations, both official and grassroots. The recognition of the Palestinian state by most Latin American countries would have been impossible without the community's constant mobilization through diaspora associations. The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement has also gained traction in Latin America, especially in Chile⁴¹ and Brazil, although it has not reached the same level of visibility as in the United States and Europe. Recently, the Palestino football club gained worldwide attention by using a map of historic Palestine on its jersey. Such commitment is also evident in the realms of Latin American art and culture, as dozens of artists of Palestinian ancestry express their solidarity with Palestine in their work and through their activism.⁴² More than ever, this diaspora community wants to take an active role in the destiny of the Palestinian people.

About the Author

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ENDNOTES

- 1 In Chile, diaspora organizations claim to represent at least 350,000 people, a figure often cited in the media. See for example "Chile se une al reconocimiento del Estado palestino," BBC Mundo, 12 January 2011; "Al menos ocho naciones de AL apoyan al Estado palestino," CNN México, 6 January 2011.
- 2 'Adnan Musallam, "Palestinian Diaspora in Latin America, The Formative Stages, 19th Century to Early 20th Century," *II Encuentro Colombo-Arabe* (November 2006), pp. 23–24.
- 3 Kemal H. Karpat, "The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860–1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 2, (May 1985), p. 85.
- 4 Edna Bonacich, "A Theory of Middleman Minorities," *American Sociological Review*, 38:5, Oct. 1973, pp. 583–594.
- 5 The term criollo refers to native-born white or light-skinned *mestizo* individuals of Hispanic descent.
- 6 Antonia Robelleo Hernandez, "Turcofobia: Discriminación antiárabe en Chile, 1900–1950," *Historia (Santiago)* 28 (1994), pp. 248–272.
- 7 Cecilia Baeza, "Les Palestiniens d'Amérique latine et la cause palestinienne: Chili, Brésil, Honduras (1920–2010)" (PhD diss., Institut d'études politiques, 2010). pp. 75–78.
- 8 Such fears were closely linked to transnational religious allegiances. In 1911–12, the Ottoman army was recruiting soldiers for the war in the Balkans, and the Greek front divided the Arabs of Palestine. In particular, as Muslims organized a campaign for Turkish victims, Greek Orthodox Christians collected funds for Greek families, and Christians worried about the possible repercussions. See Yehoshua Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement 1918–1929* (London: Frank Cass, 1974), pp. 299–300.
- 9 'Abd Allah Lutfiyya, *Baytin, A Jordanian Village: a Study of Social Institutions and Social Change in Folk Society* (The Hague: Mouton and Co, 1966), p. 123.
- 10 Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *The First Well, a Bethlehem Boyhood* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), p. 186.
- 11 For example, according to Nancie Gonzalez, 92.5 percent of marriages among Palestinian immigrants in Honduras were endogamous during the period 1900–29. Nancie Gonzalez, *Dollar, Dove, and Eagle: One Hundred Years of Palestinian Migration to Honduras* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 116.
- 12 The developmental state is one that intervenes directly in the economy in order to promote national development. In particular, it protects and fosters industry, initially pursuing an import substitution industrialization strategy. See Peter H. Smith, "The Rise and Fall of the Developmental State in Latin America," in *The Changing Role of the State in Latin America*, ed. Menno Vellinga (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 51–73.
- 13 Peter Winn, *Weavers of Revolution: The Yarur Workers and Chile's Road to Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- 14 He was joined by the Andonie family and the Facussé family, with the latter opening Textiles Rio Lindo in the 1930s, a major textile manufacturer in the region.
- 15 This process accelerated during the 1960s. In Chile, the Said and Saffie clans created the Banco del Trabajo and the Banco Panamericano respectively. The same happened in Honduras where Palestinian families were instrumental in the creation of BANFINAN in 1964. See Darío Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic: Region and State in Honduras, 1870–1972* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
- 16 Wadi Da'mas was elected mayor of the town of La Romana, the provincial capital of La Romana province in the Dominican Republic, in 1923.
- 17 Edesio Alvarado, *El Turco Tarud: la verdad sobre un tiempo y una historia* (Santiago: Territorio, 1970), p. 269.

- 18 Formed in 1945, the PAL was dissolved in 1958. During the 1960s, most Chilean politicians of Arab descent ended up joining the ranks of the center-left Christian Democratic Party. See Donald W. Bray, "The Political Emergence of Arab-Chileans, 1952-1958," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 4, no. 4 (October 1962), pp. 557-562.
- 19 Alberto Kassis was a founder of the Pinochet Foundation in 1995. The main objective of the foundation is to "disseminate to the new generations the work and legacy of President Pinochet." See www.fundacionpresidentepinochet.cl.
- 20 Moisés Hassan left the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in 1988.
- 21 The only organization that referred to the Ottoman Empire was the "Charitable Ottoman Society" created in Chile in 1904.
- 22 They include the Palestinian Youth Society (1924), the Palestinian Club (1938), the Palestinian Union Center (1929), Unión La Liga Palestina in Tela (1929), the Sociedad Unión Palestina in San Pedro Sula (1929), Centro Unión Palestina in Cusco (1928), the Sociedad Fraternidad Palestina in San Salvador (1927) and the Centro Social Palestino in Mexico City (1929).
- 23 The Treaty of Lausanne stipulated that Ottoman nationals "habitually residents" of Palestine would ipso facto become nationals of the Mandate Palestinian state. This nationality was contingent upon established residence in Palestine on the date the treaty came into force (6 August 1924). Those who could not obtain this nationality within the nine-month transition period had to apply for a residence visa, as they were considered foreigners with no special rights.
- 24 Mutaz Qafisheh, *The International Law Foundations of Palestinian Nationality: A Legal Examination of Nationality in Palestine Under Britain's Rule* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers / Brill Academic, 2009), p. 140.
The case of Bethlehem-born Issa Nasser, who emigrated from Palestine on an Ottoman passport to Chile as a merchant in 1913, is illustrative of Britain's policy on the immigration issue. Needing to travel to Palestine on business following the automatic nullification of his Ottoman passport after Lausanne, Nasser was issued an "emergency certificate" by the British consulate in Valparaiso to be able to travel to Palestine. The temporary document specifically stated, however, that it did "not guarantee that the holder would be authorized to land or remain in Palestine." (The Lausanne Treaty directed the Mandate government to "facilitate the acquisition of Palestinian citizenship by Jews who take up residence in Palestine.")
- 25 Qafisheh, *The International Law Foundations of Palestinian Nationality*, p. 224. Qafisheh quotes Government of Palestine's *A Survey of Palestine* with the exact figure at 367, 845. (The *Survey* was prepared for the information of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in Jerusalem, 1946.)
- 26 Akram Zuayter, *Rihlat al-wafd al-arabi ila Amerika alkatubuta fu sa bil Filastin: Muhimma fi Qarra* (Beirut: Dar al Hayat, 1950) p. 448.
- 27 Latin American countries played a crucial role in the voting of the resolution, accounting for twenty of the fifty-seven members of the United Nations at the time. While Chile, Honduras, El Salvador, Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico abstained, and Cuba opposed the resolution, the other thirteen Latin American countries voted in favor. See Edward Glick, "Latin America and the Palestine Partition Resolution," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 1, no. 2 (1959), pp. 211-222.
- 28 The Palestinian Club is the largest private social club in Santiago, boasting numerous amenities including multiple tennis courts, two soccer fields, large gardens, an Olympic-size swimming pool, a gym, and a clubhouse with large reception rooms, a theatre, and restaurants. See <http://www.clubpalestino.cl>.
- 29 See www.clubarabe.com/espanol/inicio.html.
- 30 In Honduras, for example, the nationalist ethnic press declined and eventually disappeared.
- 31 Roberto Abu-Eid Ayub, "Histórico programa radial: La Voz de Palestina," *Al Damir*, no. 74 (December 2009), pp. 50-51.
- 32 "Primer Congreso Palestino Latino-Americano," *Palestina Patria Mártir* (Santiago), May-June 1966, p. 2-12.

- 33 Yossi Shain, "Arab-Americans at a Crossroad," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 25, no. 3 (Spring 1996), p. 47.
- 34 Richard Marienstras, "Sur la notion de diaspora," in *Les Minorités à l'âge de l'Etat-nation* (Fayard, Paris, 1985), p. 225.
- 35 Emmanuel Ma Mung, "Dispersal as a resource," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 13, no. 2 (2004), pp. 211–225.
- 36 Rogers Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2005), pp. 1–19.
- 37 Ibrahim Muhawi, "Translation and the Palestinian Diaspora," in *The Palestinian Diaspora in Europe, Challenges of Dual Identity and Adaptation*, ed. Abbas Shibliak (Ramallah: Sama, 2005), p. 117–121.
- 38 Sari Hanafi, "Opening the Debate on the Right of Return," *Middle East Report*, no. 222 (Spring 2002), pp. 2–7.
- 39 Bassma Kodmani-Darwish, "La question des réfugiés et l'émergence d'une diaspora palestinienne," *Confluences Méditerranéennes* 9 (Winter 1993–94), pp. 53–60.
- 40 Julie Peteet, "Problematizing a Palestinian Diaspora," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 4 (November 2007), pp. 627–646.
- 41 See <http://cboicotisrael.blogspot.com.ar> for more on BDS in Chile.
- 42 These include such artists as the novelist Lina Meruane, who wrote the book *Volverse Palestina* about a trip she made to Palestine to learn about her family history; the filmmaker, Miguel Littin, who has created documentaries and feature films about Palestine; and the poetry of Suad Marcos, a Nicaraguan-born poet who lived in Beirut during the 1982 Israeli invasion and writes poetry about her feelings of nostalgia for Palestine.