

Refuge, Alliance, and South-South Exchange: Latin America and the Middle East

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adelante vendrían para mí otros como el de Desarrollo de la Ciencia Social en América Latina, con Hélgio Trindade como coordinados junto a Gerónimo de Sierra, Miguel Murmis y José Luis Reina. A todos ellos y otros, se agregan los múltiples congresos y seminarios latinoamericanos, imposibles de mencionar, pero entre los que deben recordarse los organizados por el Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales de la UNAM, coordinados por Julio Labastida y los de FLACSO-México. ■

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011, an estimated nine million Syrians have left their homes to seek refuge outside their country's borders, and just this past November, a record three thousand Syrians were granted asylum in Brazil, in one of the largest and least bureaucratically complicated refugee acceptances in the Americas. Two months earlier, President Dilma Rousseff authored an editorial in an outlet of the *Huffington Post* arguing that since over ten million Brazilians could claim Syrian-Lebanese heritage, it was Brazil's duty to welcome and support these new migrants with "open arms" (2015). Beyond humanitarian concerns, she argued, connections between these two regions are significant and long-standing.

The punctuality of a political or economic disaster, such as this most recent moment, reminds scholars and policy makers of these ties and their greater human or geopolitical import. However, the nature of crisis often highlights the limitations and failures of sporadic attention to such relations. While fresh urgency attends awareness of the impact of long-term intervention and population displacement in the Middle East, it is not a nuanced perspective that reveals the alliances and complicities forged from shared suffering at the hand of empire or resulting from the contest of Cold War superpowers. For over a century, migration, cooperation, and exchange between these two regions has been without significant pause, and from the middle of the twentieth century, an emerging consciousness of belonging to a community of the global South has come to mark these relations.

Middle Eastern migrants were a part of the first voyages of exploration and European conquest; merchants of the Mediterranean world conducted trade between the metropole and its outposts; and fugitives of

scarcity and oppression often made the voyage across the great Atlantic divide. Since the late nineteenth century, however, new flows of peoples gave rise to larger immigrant communities, from within which many successful businessmen, politicians, and families utilized transregional networks to forge powerful alliances between the two regions (Lesser and Klich 1998; Alfaro-Velcamp 2009). However, until recently, most scholarship of Middle East–Latin American exchange has focused rather exclusively either on migrant communities or on international diplomacy as a minor addendum to reflections on U.S. and Soviet intervention.

Economists have raised the point that we have very little understanding of how these regions interact, even on the most basic level. Trade scholars have just begun to investigate exchange and investment relations, uncovering an estimated \$40.6 billion in annual trade, making the Middle East a significant contributor to economies of the region, particularly in South America. Some have suggested that the Middle East could promise Latin America an alternative development strategy to that of the Bretton Woods system, importantly with greater autonomy from North American market forces (Ellis, Baeza, and Porras Eraso 2014). The proliferation of organizations such as the Council on Arab Relations with Latin America and the Caribbean, the Federation of Arab–South American Chambers of Commerce, and the Consejo Para las Relaciones Entre el Mundo Árabe y América Latina y el Caribe (CARLAC), alongside the expansion of the Arab–Latin American Summits, suggest that expanding economic ties are only a part of a transregional strategy to promote greater economic cooperation.

From another perspective, foreign-policy scholars have pointed to relations like those

between Venezuela and Syria, sometimes grounded in anti-American impulses, as having contributed to the rise of new global powers such as Brazil and China. South-South strategies of global security, human rights protection, and climate change prevention have taken on a greater role in international negotiations and have resulted in greater multipolarity (Hopewell 2013). Even at the local level, as John Tofik Karam illustrates, in “everyday geopolitics,” the social practices of Middle Eastern and Latin American counterparts have had important impacts. Tofik Karam offers as a case in point the tri-border area of Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina, and how these habits on a local level have helped to define boundaries and flows of goods and people, including the building of a major hydroelectric dam (2013).

Paul Silverstein argues that diasporic affiliations, “worlds *not* left behind,” also account for the reverberations of conflict in the Middle East within communities in Latin America and vice versa (2015, 282). My own research, for instance, has uncovered the role of Palestinian conflict with the Israeli state in helping to shape the agenda of the New Left in Argentina. I argue that reflections on and solidarity with “distant but significant others” in the Middle East came to structure notions of citizenship rights and political priorities through a series of successful campaigns (Stites Mor 2014). Other scholars have revealed rich histories of interconnectedness through labor relations and working-class political organizing (Winn 1991; Elsey 2012); and recently, studies of Islam have connected the cultural and spiritual paths of these regions (Logroño Narbona, Pinto, and Tofik Karam 2015). Advocating for national or communitarian goals, migrants and their networks have been able to intermittently shape state-level diplomacy

and influence humanitarian responses to conflict.

This issue of *LASA Forum* features work by scholars who collectively have called for a more sustained intellectual engagement with the relations between Latin America and the Middle East, not only as part of a better understanding of these regions but also as foundational to our ability to understand present geopolitical realities. Contributors to this special issue have taken on a range of topics from intellectual currents to mutual aid societies. Lily Balloffet examines the most recent responses of Latin American countries to the refugee crisis in contrast with historical patterns of aid and assistance to refugees. She calls for a broadening of data collection and questions why Latin America was not subject to the same of the same extreme varieties of racism seen in their counterparts in the North in response to flows of migrants. Jorge Araneda Tapia pushes the boundaries of study of diasporic communities, asking questions about the identitarian politics of these communities as they struggled to assert themselves within the ranks of the upper-middle classes.

Fernando Camacho Padilla examines the relationship between Chile and Iran, a frustrated but significant diplomatic experiment, calling into question the influence of Latin American responses to the Iranian Revolution. Specifically, he points to the relevance of connections between the Pinochet regime and Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to each other’s domestic and international agendas. In this issue, John Tofik Karam compares Brazil’s early stance vis-à-vis the Non-Aligned Movement to the Lula administration’s approach to the region. He argues that the Brasília Declaration puts in focus the

relationship of political continuities to questions of labor, trade, and sovereignty.

From a critical distance, Anna Bernard examines literary triangulations of Middle Eastern and Latin American subjects in the writings of Edward Said and Salman Rushdie that point to greater intellectual and symbolic interconnectedness between these regions. In similar fashion, David Sheinin reflects on the assassination of Alberto Nisman, arguing that domestic issues in Argentina are inextricably tied to broader policy decisions regarding the Middle East.

The issue concludes with a note on the profession, an interview with David Grantham, which speaks to the challenges of sustained scholarly attention to the region, academic and other forms of preparation, and the matter of sources.

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Syrian Refugees in Latin America: Diaspora Communities as Interlocutors

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In the wake of the tragic mid-November bombings in Paris, there has been a staggeringly rapid response from politicians in the United States regarding U.S. immigration policy toward Syrian refugees. Within a matter of days, dozens of governors made public statements intended to roll back months of progress toward legislation that would grant asylum to thousands of Syrian refugees. In contrast, Latin American leaders’ expressions of sympathy and solidarity with France have not been accompanied by a reactionary wave of anti-immigration discourse. As is typical of sensationalistic press coverage, the international media has largely ignored a century of Syrian migration to the Western Hemisphere. This article provides historical context, as well as a discussion of current policy initiatives targeting Syrian refugees in Latin America. We must understand how the global Arab diaspora has shaped current immigration policies and nongovernmental support networks for refugees. I will also discuss future directions for research that will improve our ability to speak in an informed manner about diasporic Middle Eastern communities in the Americas.

Contemporary Migrant Flows

Press coverage and social media bombard us with conflicting messages about Latin America’s role in receiving Syrian refugees during the current “migration crisis.” Grandiose statements from national leaders are dramatized, yet Latin American asylum data almost unilaterally fails to appear in reports on where displaced peoples end up landing. It is indeed true that, so far, the total number of officially documented cases of asylum and special visas granted by Latin American host countries is minuscule in comparison to displacement figures within the Middle East and arrivals to

Southeastern Europe (fewer than ten thousand have come to Latin America, in contrast to the more than six million displaced people in the Middle East and Southern Europe). Nevertheless, if we are truly invested in understanding the mechanics of the growing transatlantic flow of displaced people, we must assume a transregional analysis of how newly arrived refugees are becoming incorporated into host societies in the Americas.

Since September 2015 alone, multiple Latin American leaders have come forward to propose, and in some cases enact, new policy initiatives affecting refugees. The most dramatic gesture was, by far, Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro’s statement to his cabinet that he would like to invite 20 thousand Syrian refugees to make their home in his country. This follows Venezuela’s expulsion of thousands of Colombians living on Venezuelan soil, and since September Maduro’s gesture toward Syrian-oriented refugee policy remains just that—a gesture, not formalized policy. In other cases, Latin American leaders have more nebulously professed “open arms” to Syrian refugees, as was the case with Chilean president Michelle Bachelet and former Argentine president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. In marked contrast, Brazil has issued more humanitarian visas than the rest of Latin America and the United States combined (over two thousand as of September), and the government estimates that some four thousand more Syrians have entered Brazil outside officially documented paths. As increasing numbers of U.S. politicians pressure their government to tighten restrictions on Syrian resettlement within U.S. borders, we must consider the potential diversion of some of this transatlantic flow of refugees to Latin America, and a subsequent spike in visa requests or asylum petitions.