

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.

However, what happens to Syrian and other Middle Eastern refugees upon their arrival to the Americas depends heavily on what sort of federally funded support systems are in place, and what kind of nongovernmental networks and actors have tried to fill the gaps when these systems are lacking. Attention to these questions has been, so far, oblique and much less publicized than sweeping proclamations made by heads of state, some of whom find themselves treading water amid public outcry, or the tenuous party politics of campaign seasons. Or both. This discourse must be situated within the much longer history of Syrians who have been coming to settle in Latin America for well over one hundred years now.

Syrian Migration in Historical Perspective

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, more than a quarter of a million people from the current geographic territory of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine began to emigrate from the crumbling Ottoman Empire to Latin America. Driven primarily by the lure of opportunity, and even prosperity, that American horizons offered, these waves of immigrants were not refugees as is the case today. Exact numbers are difficult to pinpoint, but by 1940 some three hundred thousand Arabic speakers from the Eastern Mediterranean had arrived in Latin America, from Northern Mexico to the Patagonian territory. The communities and networks that these individuals proceeded to build more than a century ago persist today. They have also placed this heritage community in the spotlight as potential interlocutors at another moment of mass migration from (and within) the Middle East.

In nations such as Brazil and Argentina, Middle Eastern immigrants represented a

part of much larger immigration booms of the mid to late nineteenth century, and they generally entered through major clearinghouse ports such as Buenos Aires and Santos. In the case of landlocked areas such as the Gran Chaco, smaller groups of Levantine Arabic speakers made their way overland to remote outposts, and many set up shop as purveyors of dry goods and other materials that would sustain the inhabitants of rural frontier spaces. This first wave of arrivals did not often leave behind abundant documentation as to how they made their way from their port of arrival to their final destination. Nevertheless, we can track this ethnic community's steady expansion across Latin American terrain by other means, such as mapping the societies and institutions that this first generation established.

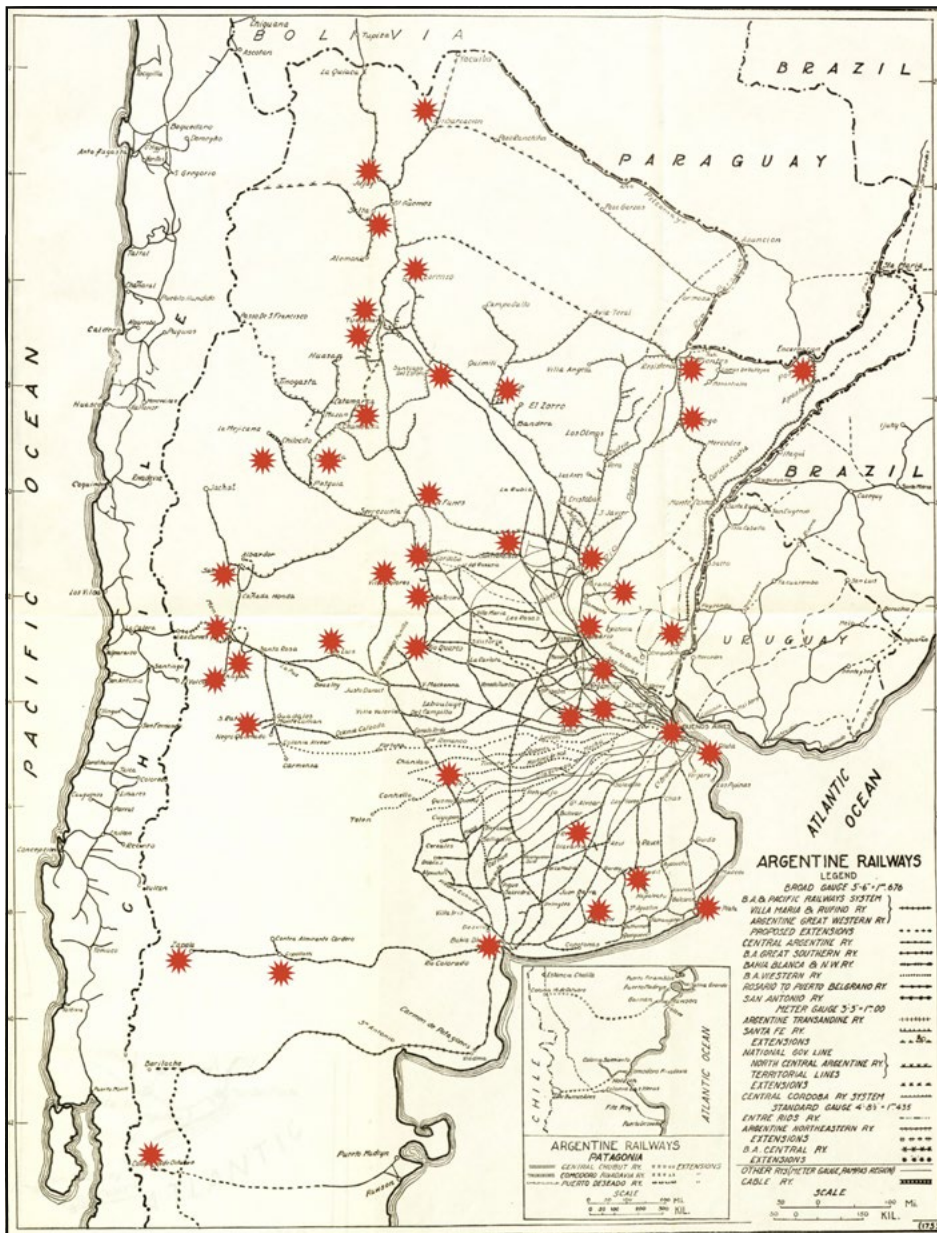
Throughout North and South America, hometown clubs, mutual aid societies, intellectual circles, business bureaus, and religious institutions pertaining to these Middle Eastern immigrant communities began to appear in the first decades of the twentieth century. These voluntary associations acted as essential conduits in linking together members of the larger Arab diaspora, or *mahjar*, who looked to effect political, intellectual, or economic change back in the Middle East. Events such as the 1925 Syrian Revolt, or World Wars I and II, were met with a flurry of philanthropic campaigns, political activism, and debates in vibrant diasporic print media. This culture of long-distance involvement, characterized by a circulation of resources and ideas, is indicative of the existence of a "transnational public sphere" that connected Arab Latin Americans to both their Middle Eastern homelands and diaspora communities across the globe (Fahrenheit 2014; Bailony 2013; Amar 2014).

Voluntary associations such as São Paulo's Homs Club, the Club Sirio Libanés of Buenos Aires, or Club Libanés Sirio Palestino of Santiago, performed a variety of services for their Arab Latin American members. These were sites of medical care, informal banking, and conscious preservation of the Arabic language, among other things. These types of associations appeared, predictably, in ethnically diverse urban centers with large immigrant populations but also in rural towns and villages throughout Latin America.

Despite an increasing number of studies of Arab diaspora communities focusing on core urban migration areas such as New York, Cairo, São Paulo, or Buenos Aires, we still know relatively little about how these central migratory hubs related to vast networks of rural, provincial diasporic nodes. In Argentina, the Latin American nation that received the most Levantine immigrants prior to 1940, we can clearly see the proliferation of Syrian and Lebanese heritage societies along the burgeoning Argentine railway system of the early 1900s that carried Middle Eastern immigrants deep into Argentina's interior (see figure 1).

The steady "transnational turn" in methodological approaches to understanding history has illuminated the importance of recognizing the transnational exchanges of people, politics, money, and cultural production that exist between diaspora communities and their homelands—in this case Latin America and the Arab world. New historiography in the field of migration studies has consistently pushed us to conceive of transnational networks as our base unit of analysis, rather than neatly defined geopolitical packages. However, as a result, few studies of the Arab diaspora, especially of its Latin American region, have considered the actual mechanics by which these immigrant

Figure 1: Middle Eastern heritage societies in Argentina



of cultural production, this network also fostered Arab Argentine artistic, literary, and cinematic innovation that benefited from a network of funding generated by a web of Levantine immigrants across South America. Through periods of economic depression and state violence and other difficult times, these associations helped to sustain Arab diaspora communities economically, culturally, and socially.

The case of Argentina’s Syrian-Lebanese Hospital is an illustrative example of how the Arab Argentine diasporic network collectively executed major institutional projects. In 1917, a group of elite Arab Argentine women came together to form a secular association by the name of Sociedad de Obras de Misericordia, later renaming themselves the Asociación de Beneficencia Pro Hospital Sirio Libanés in 1923, when they turned their focus entirely to the task of building a clinic that would cater to their ethnic community (for example, it would have a bilingual Arabic-Spanish medical team). Only a decade later, they had raised enough money to purchase the property for the Syrian-Lebanese Hospital and immediately began the construction of additional medical facilities. It was a momentous feat of fund-raising, and even then president of Argentina, General Agustín P. Justo, was in attendance at the hospital’s groundbreaking ceremony.

communities formed the local networks that enabled large-scale transnational flows of culture and capital. What has been missed, in pursuing analyses of these global networks, in regard to the local networks that underpinned them?

In my own research in national archives and local heritage associations in six Argentine provinces, I discovered evidence of a vibrant network of Arab Argentine institutions that spanned the nation. I

concluded that it was this network of diasporic nodes that ranged from tiny rural communities to the federal capitals throughout the Southern Cone which enabled the execution of large-scale projects that took place in Buenos Aires. These projects included construction of the Syrian-Lebanese Hospital and Syrian-Lebanese Bank, and international philanthropic campaigns that aided natural disaster victims, for example, in Japan, Russia, or Jerusalem. From the perspective

The funds that they raised for this project came from all over the country—from provincial capitals to tiny villages on the Bolivian border and down into the Patagonian territory. The women who managed the execution of this project actually referred to the provinces as their “Pillars of Gold.” They created a structure of “Official and Honorary Delegates,” whom they charged with spreading the word about their project and who would organize fund-raising campaigns across the

country, and even across the Southern Cone more widely. Regional heritage organizations in the provinces acted as conduits for these fund-raising efforts, and individuals associated with these groups served as guides for fund-raisers from the capital, who ventured far out into rural areas to drum up donations. The successful efforts of this campaign to build the hospital resulted in the Syrian-Lebanese Hospital becoming a powerful and well-endowed institution within the wider Arab Argentine community. It also provided an institutional platform from which its board of directors could make decisions about engaging in transnational philanthropy in the form of remitting funds to the Middle East in times of crisis and natural disaster.

Looking at organizations like the Syrian-Lebanese Hospital allows us to decenter our vision of the Arab diaspora in Argentina by looking beyond urban hubs and major immigration ports and examining the role of “peripheral” diasporic nodes in the formation of local networks, institution building, and philanthropy. As we see with the hospital, and indeed many other organizations, the periphery was in fact instrumental in the construction of international networks of diasporic Arabs across Latin America, and also in terms of the transnational connections that these diasporic communities cultivated with the Middle East/North Africa region. For many of these Arab Argentine organizations, these transnational charitable campaigns persist today. This raises the question: is it possible for Arab Latin American heritage organizations to play the role of interlocutor between Latin American governments and Levantine refugees who wish to attempt a new life on Latin American soil today?

Heritage Associations and Local Networks

Media coverage of Latin American responses to the Syrian refugee situation provides evidence that some of these organizations actively entered debates on visa and asylum policy. In Argentina, for example, the Islamic Cultural Center of Argentina, the Federation of Argentine Arab Entities, and the Orthodox Church have sent representatives to work with Argentine policy makers on that government’s emergency humanitarian visa program known as “Programa Siria.” In Brazil, organizations such as the Liga da Juventude Islâmica Beneficente do Brasil and the Do Pari mosque of São Paulo offer Portuguese language classes to newly arrived immigrants and provide services to aid new arrivals in the navigation of Brazilian bureaucratic systems. In Mexico City, some five hundred Mexicans of Arab heritage participated in a September 2015 protest outside the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, in which they called upon their government to expedite policy initiatives that would provide asylum for Syrian refugees.

Beyond federal capitals and major cities such as São Paulo, provincial associations such as Argentina’s Centro Sirio Libanés of Gualeguaychú, in the northeastern province of Entre Ríos, have also come forward to announce their intention to house Syrian refugees. The Centro recently publicized to the national press that it had organized the necessary resources to take eight to ten Syrian families into its community. The Syrian-Lebanese community of the rural town of Oberá, in the Argentine province of Misiones, has also been meeting with provincial administrators to push through paperwork that would allow the relatives of *misioneros* of Arab descent to bring family members from Syria to Oberá.

In the case of the Argentine Programa Siria visa policy, the importance of kinship ties between Argentines and Arabs is built into the legislation. Applicants for emergency visas through this program must demonstrate a bond of kinship with an Argentine who will then act as their sponsor. One young Syrian refugee recently described to the Argentine press how her uncle in Buenos Aires, whom she had never met before, was nevertheless able to act as her sponsor under Programa Siria. In this case, her great-uncle’s local Arab Argentine heritage organization, Asociación Kalaat Yandal, was able to help facilitate the process. Founded in the 1930s by the first group of Syrian immigrants hailing from the village of Qal’at Jandal, the association was founded with the aim of creating a space where Syrian immigrants could gather, speak their language, eat typical Syrian food, and keep in contact with others who immigrated to Argentina from the Middle East. More than seventy years later, heritage associations such as Asociación Kalaat Yandal are looking to once again assert this mission.

Groups that advocate increased Syrian migration to Latin American host countries have also employed rhetoric that harkens back to nineteenth-century discourses on immigration and colonization. A November 13 letter from eight Arab Argentine associations directed to former president Fernández de Kirchner went so far as to suggest the positive benefits of resettling Syrian refugees in Argentina’s sparsely populated regions such as Patagonia. In this case, we witness an eerie echo of nineteenth-century *gobemar es poblar* ideology. Simultaneously, it is also an interesting subversion of an era of positivist logic, which insisted that to populate a nation with immigrant stock was indeed the best course of action, but with the strict

caveat that said immigrant stock must be European and white.

Lest the above examples risk painting an overly rosy picture of Arab Latin Americans as interlocutors during this time of mass migration, it is also important to acknowledge that contemporary migration flows from the Middle East have not been met with uniform solidarity. A recent report emanating from the Paris Institute of Political Studies characterized the involvement of Arab diaspora communities in the reception of refugees as “well below its potential.” The authors of this report also point out that some individuals of Syrian heritage in Latin America fear that the arrival of Muslim refugees would change the image of the diaspora, which was historically mainly Christian. Adolfo Numi, director of the Syrian Charitable Society in Chile, is quoted as recently saying in a public interview: “We want to bring Syrian refugees to Chile, and we don’t want to discriminate by religion, but we want the Syrian community in Chile to remain Christian in its majority” (Baeza 2015).

The gulf between the anxieties expressed by Numi and the response of organizations such as Gualeguaychú’s Centro Sirio Libanés also recalls controversies and fractures present among the first and second generation of Arab Latin Americans. In one dramatic case in Argentina, a scandal broke out in the early 1940s when an Arab Argentine newspaper attempted to uncover the abuses of a powerful Syrian-Lebanese heritage association. The exposé accused one of Buenos Aires’ most historic mutual aid societies of forcibly “repatriating” destitute Syrians living in Argentina. The accusing newspaper decried what they saw as elite Arab Argentines’ desire to sanitize and police the image of Middle Easterners that would be presented

to Argentine society at large. It is clear that at mid-century, as in 2015, anxiety over preserving a certain image of Arab diaspora communities in Latin America—be that an image based on socioeconomic status, politics, or religion—plays into diasporic responses to “open arms” policies for Syrian migrants.

Achieving Accurate Demographics

Beyond the need to historically contextualize current polemics regarding refugee policy in Latin America, media coverage of these events also serves as a blatant reminder that we are currently operating from a place of acute uncertainty when it comes to reliable demographic data regarding Latin Americans of Middle Eastern heritage. A century after the initial waves of Levantine immigrants brought some three hundred thousand people from the greater Syrian region of the Ottoman Empire, estimates of how many “Arab” Latin Americans live today in nations such as Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Argentina have exploded. Unsubstantiated claims that there are currently upwards of 10 million, or even 25 million Latin Americans of Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian heritage appear repeatedly and anecdotally in journalistic renderings of Latin America–Middle East relations. How did we arrive at these numbers? Who are we imagining these numbers to represent? At the root of this problem (perhaps one of many roots), is the lack of any formal consensus in terms of what it means to identify as, or be identified as, Arab Latin American.

Scholars need to do the demographic grunt work that will finally allow us to achieve a more accurate portrait of Middle Eastern immigration to Latin America, from the first generation on. We should begin by mining the data sets that we do have

available to us, such as national census and immigration records, on a country by country basis. From there, we can start to build a sharper picture of where Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian immigrants to the Americas settled, and in what numbers, over the course of the past hundred years. Ideally, these demographic maps of the Arab diaspora in Latin America will even hold the potential for us to track whether or not refugees from the Middle East today gravitate toward historically populous Arab Latin American diasporic nodes when they make their transatlantic journeys. Here at North Carolina State University’s Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, a team of historians has already begun this work and is making great strides in the task of digitally mapping North American Arab communities. In an effort to extend these maps into the Southern Hemisphere, scholars in the field of Middle East migration studies have already compiled the archival material necessary to expand this digital mapping project to encompass Central and South American Arab diaspora communities, and it is only a matter of time before the numbers start to become clearer.

In addition to crunching numbers and dispelling overblown (yet rarely questioned) estimates of the population of Arab Latin Americans, this type of data mining can also lead us to revise long-standing cultural myths. For example, a recent demographic analysis of first-generation Syrians and Lebanese in the United States has effectively dispelled the myth that the first wave of immigrants was almost entirely comprised of single men. In fact, records show that more than 40 percent of early twentieth century Levantine arrivals were women (Vartanian and Khater 2015). This raises the question: What other populations, besides women, have been edited out of many generations of *mahjar*

historiography? How sturdy is the foundation upon which we have constructed our understanding of the migratory flows that have long connected these two world regions?

There of course remains much work to be done before we achieve a more complete demographic picture of the distribution and mechanics of the Latin American region of the global Arab diaspora. In the meantime, there remains the urgency of finding solutions to the burgeoning population of stateless people passing through the Mediterranean border region. As these individuals fan out across the globe, we will doubtless continue to periodically turn our attention to the role that Latin American nations propose to play in the migration crisis. When doing this, scholars should keep in mind the force that historic diasporic networks can potentially bring to bear on the experience that awaits those refugees who do navigate their way to Latin American shores.

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