

ARAB DIASPORA IN LATIN AMERICA

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On December 22, 2022, Chilean president Gabriel Boric announced plans for the country's capital of Santiago to open an embassy in Palestine. Motivated by a desire to ensure that "international law" is upheld, this move would make Chile the fourth Latin American country to establish full diplomatic representation in the occupied territories.¹ This strengthening of relations between Chile and Palestine was received positively by the country's sizable Palestinian community.

Chile has the largest community of Palestinians living outside of the Arab World—estimates place the number of Chileans of Palestinian descent to be between 300,000 and 500,000.² This may be surprising to some given the geographic distance between Latin America and the Middle East, but in reality, the prevalence of Arabs in Latin America transcends Chile. Indeed, there are sizable Arab communities in many Latin American countries, ranging from Brazil to El Salvador. This trans-national history begs the questions: how did so many Arabs end up in Latin America, and in what ways has this Arab migration influenced contemporary Latin American societies, cultures, and politics?

Some people may be familiar with the Arab origins of celebrities like Shakira or Salma Hayek, but the trans-national and deeply connected histories of the Middle East and Latin America are often not adequately represented in mainstream media. To fully appreciate how cross-cultural connections and interactions manifest today, it is nec-

essary to explore the history that predates them. Arab migration to Latin America mainly began during the 20th century. It consisted primarily of Arab Christians, but also included Muslims and Jews, many of whom fled the Levant during the Ottoman Empire's rule.³ As a result, these newly arrived Arab immigrants were prematurely classified as "Turks" or "Turcos." Other waves of Arab migration into countries in the Southern American continent followed due to the colonial dispossession of Palestinians in 1948, the Lebanese Civil War in the 70s, and more recently, the Syrian Civil War.⁴

Today, estimates suggest that there are between 14 and 30 million people of Arab descent in Latin America.⁵ The influences of these Arab communities are reflected through elements of the region's food that embody a fusion of cuisines. For example, the popular dish *los tacos árabes* are Shawarma-like tacos whose innovation was inspired by Middle Eastern immigrants in the Mexican metropolis of Puebla.⁶ Additionally, the regional prevalence of multi-religious Arab social clubs, "Centros Arabes," is yet another manifestation of the influences of these communities within Latin American societies.⁷ Beyond food and culture, Arab communities in Latin America have also left indelible marks on politics. There are a plethora of countries with former Latin American presidents of Arab origins, including Argentina (Carlos Menem, 1989–99), Ecuador (Abdalá Bucaram, 1996–97, and Jamil Mahuad, 1998–2000), El Salvador (Eliás Antonio Saca, 2004–9), Honduras

(Carlos Flores Facussé, 1998–2002), and Colombia (Julio César Turbay, 1978–82).⁸ Moreover in Brazil—which is home to the largest Arab population outside of the Arab world—over 10 percent of the parliament consists of politicians of Arab descent.⁹

While it is tempting to assume that these histories of migration constitute the only ties between Latin America and the Middle East, this is not the case. Well before the wide-scale migration of Arabs to majority Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America, the Arab world had already shared an intertwined history with Spain; and the influences derived from this intertwined history were transported to Latin America through Spanish colonization. From the start of the Islamic Golden Age in the 8th century to the late 15th century, varying Islamic empires ruled over the Iberian Peninsula. Al-Andalus, a region comprising both modern day Spain and Portugal, was at the heart of one of the greatest Muslim civilizations until the Spanish Reconquista in 1492.¹⁰ These 800 years of Muslim

rule over Spain are evident not only in the architecture, design, food, and philosophy of Spain, but also in the Spanish Language itself.¹¹ For example, we see the linguistic connections between the two languages in words like *sugar*, which translates to *azúcar* in Spanish and *al-sukkar* in Arabic, as well as *ojalá* which translates to *inshAllah* in Arabic. Former director of the Spanish Royal Academy estimates that about 4,000 words of modern Spanish come from Arabic.¹²

Ultimately, Latin America is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the world. Arab migrants to the region have formed and sustained lively communities and have contributed to the politics, culture, and societies of Latin America. After examining this history of transcontinental ties, one can't help but wonder what the future holds for Arab communities in Latin America and how these communities will continue influencing Latin American-Arab relations.

