

them, mainly the Christians, have adopted Spanish common names, and have participated in politics as congressmen, ministers, mayors, and diplomats. Carlos Flores-Facusse and Antonio Saca were even elected as presidents of Honduras and El Salvador, respectively. These immigrants do not speak Arabic and have accelerated, by means of education and their economic activities, the integration process into the society and culture of the various host countries. Presently, in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, and less visibly in Costa Rica, there are Palestinian descendants in a wide variety of professional, artistic, cultural, scientific, sports, industrial, financial, and commercial activities. More recent Palestinian immigrants have arrived in search of better living conditions due to political problems and economic crisis in the Middle East. The general pattern that can be observed in this new group of Palestinian immigrants after the foundation of the State of Israel (1948) and the Israeli military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank (1967) is their greater intellectual preparation, their urban origins, and their clear desire to defend the rights of the Palestinian people. Most of these new and more recent immigrants are Muslims, although there are some Christians too. Some others have emigrated to these Central American republics due to their marriages to citizens of these countries. This has created matrimonial liaisons mixed in religion, culture, and ethnic group.¹⁸⁴

In Central America, the second, the third, and in certain cases even the fourth generation of Palestinian descendants have lost the Arabic language. Still, they have a clear desire to defend the Palestinian people and to rescue the Arab cultural values and traditions. For that matter, they have founded cultural organizations and have published newspapers, bulletins, and magazines with the intention to preserve and spread Arab cultural values and traditions in these countries. Likewise, they attempt to accomplish a greater understanding and solidarity between the national communities and the Arab immigrants and their descendants.

Palestinian Diaspora in Central America - A Story of Hardship and Success¹⁸⁵ -

Manzar Foroohar

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a large number of Palestinians and their descendants, who live in different Central American countries as part of the Palestinian international diaspora, have played a major role in the social, cultural, and economic development of their Central American host countries. Despite that, however, Palestinians are almost invisible in Central American historiography. Only a few Latin Americanists have attempted to study the history of Palestinian immigration to Central America and its impact on the socioeconomic and cultural formation of the region.¹⁸⁶

This chapter is an attempt to document the previously neglected history of the Palestinian diaspora in Central America. It focuses on the history of the formation of Palestinian communities in the region and the social, economic, and political contributions they have made to their adopted countries. The paper is based on existing documentation as well as interviews that were made with the immigrants and their descendants in Central America and/or with persons “back home” familiar with the emigration. While Palestinian communities throughout Central America will be discussed, particular attention will be paid to Honduras and El Salvador; the countries with the largest concentration of Palestinians in the region.

The Early Immigrants

Palestinian immigration to Central America began at the end of the nineteenth century. Because Palestine, like most of the Arab Middle East, was under Ottoman rule until 1918, it is difficult to document the numbers of immigrants accurately since they carried Ottoman (Turkish) passports and therefore were categorized in the Central American registries as Turks (turcos). Although some documentation of the Palestinian component of Arab immigration exists for Honduras, where Palestinians are shown to constitute the overwhelming majority,¹⁸⁷ no such information is available for the other states of the region.

The majority of the early Palestinian immigrants were young men who belonged to Christian communities in Palestine, especially around the Bethlehem-Jerusalem area. Highlighting the

Christian faith of the majority of early immigrants, some scholars point to religious persecution of Christian minorities as an important factor in the early emigration out of Palestine.¹⁸⁸ However, there is no historical proof of this assertion, and most historians of the Middle East point to the general economic decline of the Ottoman Empire and the ongoing wars as the main reasons for emigration of both Christian and Muslim citizens of the Empire. They argue that, because of religious identification, the majority of Muslim Ottoman emigrants preferred to move to Egypt whereas the Christians moved to Christian countries in the West, where they could easily blend into Christian communities and churches.¹⁸⁹

There is a general agreement among the historians about the impact of the economic decline of the Ottoman Empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on emigration of Palestinians and other citizens of the Empire. Under the Ottoman rule, agriculture was neglected for centuries. The peasants' lack of knowledge of agricultural technology and pest control combined with inadequate rainfall resulted in a gradual decline of the agriculture. Added to these problems were foreign competition, lack of security in the countryside, constant threat of Bedouin raids, and peasants' defenselessness against the greed of Ottoman tax collectors. The life of the Ottoman peasant was getting progressively more difficult in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The traditional industries, especially in textile sector, were also declining in the nineteenth century in the face of foreign competition. Low tariffs on foreign imports, imposed on the Ottoman Empire due to "capitulation" agreements with European powers, flooded the market with cheap foreign textile, and caused a process of decline for domestic silk and cotton textile industries. Another factor in the decline of traditional industries was the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which not only hurt the traditional trading routes in the Ottoman Empire, but also facilitated transportation of Japanese and Chinese silk to Europe and effectively pushed the Ottoman textile out of the international markets.

Constant wars, especially WWI, also hurt the Ottoman economy. The new conscription law, enacted in 1908, intensified the wave of emigration among young male citizens of the Empire.¹⁹⁰ In interviews with descendants of early immigrants, two factors were repeatedly pointed out as the main reasons for early emigration: miserable economic conditions during the war, and the military draft obligations.¹⁹¹

General conditions in the home country explain the main characteristics and the motifs of Arab emigrants who arrived in Central America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The early emigrants were generally young males, 15 to 30 years old, looking for an opportunity to prosper in a foreign land. A majority wanted to return home after saving money. Writing about early Syrian [including Palestinians and Lebanese] immigrants to the United States, Philip Hitti, argues

that "the ideal of the first immigrants to the United States was to amass all the wealth possible in the shortest time and then return to Syria to enjoy it in peace and quietude."¹⁹²

Although it is difficult to calculate the number of emigrants who returned home following a brief period of emigration, some scholars believe that "between one-third to one-half of the early emigrants returned home and invested their savings in land and new homes."¹⁹³

The returning emigrants' wealth and prosperity was a new factor in encouraging the local population, especially young men, to follow suit and try their luck in foreign ventures. Returning emigrants also acted as information sources about foreign countries and economic opportunities in the Americas.

Local steamship-company agents facilitated the emigration, arranging transport for emigrants from villages and towns to major ports, and from there to Europe and then the Americas.¹⁹⁴ The journey to Central America would take one to three months in small, poorly ventilated cabins under deplorable conditions.¹⁹⁵ According to accounts by early immigrants and their descendants, many had originally wanted to go to the United States and had purchased their passages accordingly. But as the first stop of ships from Europe to the Americas was a port either in the Caribbean or in Central America, some were simply deposited there despite the promises by the travel agents, and told they had reached their final destination.¹⁹⁶ Interviews with the descendants of Palestinian immigrants to Central America, over and over, pointed to arrival sites such as Port of Corinto in Nicaragua and Puerto Limon in Costa Rica as places the immigrants were left by the boats that were supposed to take them to the United States.¹⁹⁷

The attraction of the United States for the early Palestinian emigrants was, at least partially, due to the success of Palestinian merchants participating in international expositions in the United States such as the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876, the Chicago fair of 1893, and the St. Luis exhibition of 1906. Philip Hitti, one of the first historians writing about Arab immigration to the Americas, describes the Columbian Exposition of 1893 (in Chicago) as "constituting the first general bugle call to the land of opportunity." According to Hitti, "the exposition is known to have attracted especially traders from Jerusalem and Ramallah who brought with them olive wood articles and other curios."¹⁹⁸ Najib Saliba affirms that "there are abundant references to the importance of those fairs in attracting and spreading immigrants all over the country. Among the Syrian [including Palestinian] goods displayed were icons, strings of beads, and crosses, items for which Palestine was noted."¹⁹⁹

Adnan Musallam reports the accounts told by the descendants of the early immigrants as follows: "According to oral traditions, Bethlehemites Geris Ibrahim Suleiman Mansoor Handal, Geris Anton Abul-'Arraj, Hanna Khalil Moros, and Mishel and Gabriel Dabdoub and others attended these international exhibitions. The Handal brothers eventually settled down in New York

while the Dabdoub brothers, who received a medal during the Chicago Exhibition, returned to their native town.²⁰⁰ These merchants not only were successful in exhibiting and selling their merchandise, but they also established connections with their counterparts from other American countries and gathered information on the possibility of selling their crafts in those countries. It is possible that strong religious beliefs in Central America and demand for religious objects made in the Holy Land encouraged Palestinian merchants to explore the possibility of trade with, and immigration to, Central American countries.

Although there is no documentation of the first Palestinian who arrived in Central America, several descendants of Palestinian immigrants in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, recount the story of a Palestinian who entered Cutuco Port in El Salvador and left from Acajutla Port in the 1890s.²⁰¹ The Honduran scholar, Dario Euraque, identifies Salomon Handal as the first documented case of a Palestinian immigrant residing in San Pedro Sula in 1899.²⁰² The first documented Palestinian female immigrant, Rosa Handal, a native of Bethlehem who became involved in trade, arrived in San Pedro Sula in December 1898 at the age of 17.²⁰³

Most Palestinians who came to Central America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not arrive directly from the Middle East. Some were born in Caribbean countries such as Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, or in South American countries such as Chile and Colombia.

The majority of early immigrants were Christians from the Bethlehem-Jerusalem area. Although there were cases of Muslim immigrants from the beginning of the immigration process, the Muslim communities did not take root in the area, and there was no major Muslim Palestinian community in the region until the second half of the twentieth century. In addition to the total absence of mosques as a deterrent to settlement, cultural and social traditions also played a role. With few Muslim women making the journey, many Muslim men who decided to stay married local women, their children being baptized as Catholics.²⁰⁴

The existing historiography on Palestinian immigration generally assumes that the early emigrants were poor peasants.²⁰⁵ Tracing the family roots of early immigrants back in Palestine, however, reveals the fallacy of this generalization. Many early immigrants to Central America, especially those who settled in Honduras and El Salvador, came from the urban areas of Bethlehem and lived very close to the center of the old city of Bethlehem. A visit to Bethlehem demonstrates a well-established urban background for families such as Handal, Hazbun, and Giacaman (Yakaman), whose old residential family compounds are still used by family members in the old city. The structure and location of these residences contradict the claim that these emigrants were poor peasants. Although most of these families also owned farming lands, their main economic activities were based on commerce.²⁰⁶ Some of these families had long-established workshops and stores in

the Holy Land, especially in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, in which they were producing and selling religious and other small souvenirs made of olive wood and mother-of-pearl. Their main customers were the thousands of international tourists visiting the Holy Land every year. It was thus natural that when Palestinians arrived in the Americas, they would work in areas related to their background in trade. Many started out as itinerant salesmen, often selling small religious items from the Holy Land that were very popular among Central American Catholics, before branching out and developing new lines of trade. Most were either single men or had wives and children still in Palestine. Even those who established businesses and decided to remain in Central America maintained close ties with their families back home, returning to Palestine either to marry Palestinian women to join them or to fetch their families. Since the majority of early immigrants perceived their situation as temporary and wanted to return to their homeland, they did not invest in agriculture, which usually signifies plans for permanent residency.

Another notion widely accepted by Central and North American scholars is the assumption that the majority of Palestinian immigrants were uneducated. Again an examination of the history of Palestine, especially in the Bethlehem-Jerusalem area, demonstrates the fallacy of this generalization. Although during the Ottoman Empire the majority of Muslim Palestinians were poor peasants living in rural areas with limited access to education,²⁰⁷ a large number of Christian Palestinians lived in urban areas and had much higher access to education. In contrast to lack of educational institutions in rural areas, Palestinian cities, especially Jerusalem and Bethlehem, were dotted with missionary schools that educated the children of Christian Palestinian families. During the Ottoman rule, especially in the nineteenth century, European powers considered the missionary schools as a useful vehicle to increase their power and promote their interests in the region. These schools were established and controlled by such varied bodies as “the Church Missionary Society, the Jerusalem and East Mission, the Scots Mission, the Swedish Mission, and numerous Roman Catholic missions. In addition, other schools were maintained by local ecclesiastical and lay authorities, notably the Roman Catholic and Orthodox.”²⁰⁸ The first missionary educational institution in Palestine was established in 1645 in Jerusalem by the Order of the Friars Minor.²⁰⁹ Missionary schools in Palestine were not limited to elementary schools but provided a comprehensive educational program.

Commercial Success

Following an early period of hardship, Palestinian immigrants to Central America established prosperous businesses and, in a relatively short time span, joined the dominant class in the commercial structure of their host countries. In the late 1910s in San Pedro Sula, for example, Arab merchants, 95% of them Palestinians, “controlled major sectors of the city’s elite structure, especially large commerce.”²¹⁰

There were different reasons for the commercial success of Palestinian immigrants in Central America. This success was, at least partially, the result of existing conditions in the region when the immigrants arrived. Central American economic culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a continuation of the system established by Spanish colonialism. The Iberian colonialism in Latin America brought to the new world a socioeconomic system based on large landownership and landed aristocracy. The upper class of colonial Latin America had a deep disdain for commercial and banking activities. Devaluation of business activities by the upper class created a void in the economic system that was easily filled by immigrants, including Palestinians. They arrived at a time when economic growth, in the framework of liberal capitalism, needed a merchant class to meet the demands of a growing market economy. Palestinian immigrants, as outsiders, were not constrained by the cultural norms of the host societies and easily established themselves in businesses that, although highly profitable, were not valued in the existing culture as jobs suitable for the rich and privileged.²¹¹

To study the remarkable economic success of Palestinian immigrants in Central America, I will focus on Honduras,²¹² where a large part of commercial and industrial network of the country is dominated by descendants of Palestinian immigrants.

During the colonial period, Honduras had a poor subsistence-based economy. Following the independence and until the 1870s, the small scale export economy was based on minerals, especially gold and silver, and hardwood and cattle. Foreign investment in the country was very small and remained limited well into the first decade of the twentieth century. Although several North American mining companies, including New York and Rosario Mining Company, invested in Honduras, their activities did not benefit the country for several reasons. First, mining was limited to the areas around Tegucigalpa and did not expand to the rest of the country. Second, the numbers of workers in these mines were rarely more than 1500, and third, government decrees and concessions granted these companies tax exemptions well into the 1940s. Although the export of silver counted for 10 to 25 percent of Honduran exports, the country could not enjoy any major economic benefits from mining due to the tax exemption status of the companies.

For the most part, the Honduran economy, even in the late nineteenth century, was still traditional and pre-capitalist. In contrast to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Costa Rica, where expansion of coffee production transformed the economic structure in the second half of the nineteenth century, Honduras remained mostly a subsistence economy until the arrival of the North American banana companies in the beginning of the twentieth century. Economic stagnation and political fragmentation in the nineteenth century impeded the formation of a local bourgeoisie that would be able to respond to the demands of the external market or to form a productive system with significant national participation, as was the case for example in Costa Rica, where the growth of banana production always took second place after the nationally controlled coffee production sector.²¹³

The Honduran economic elite, which had not been able to transform itself from a traditional oligarchy to a capitalist class, could not lead nor had any major impact on the economic development of the country. Thus when the growth of banana production on the north coast changed the area to a rapidly growing economy, it was the immigrants, especially Arab Palestinians, who functioned as the merchant class and inserted themselves in the economic system filling the void.

The early Palestinian immigrants to Honduras settled in cities on the north coast such as La Lima, El Progreso and Puerto Cortés, where the banana industries were flourishing and providing opportunities for commerce. These immigrants lived modestly and invested their money in their business. Most of the single men rented a room with almost no furniture. When married, most of the early Palestinian immigrants lived in residences in the back or above their shops.²¹⁴ The Palestinian immigrants also helped their relatives and friends to immigrate to Honduras. There was a widely accepted practice of helping new immigrants by offering them jobs, housing, and low interest loans to start their own businesses. This practice created a community of successful merchants and industrialists with many members, instead of a few with large concentration of capital. In his study of the city of San Pedro Sula and the north coast of Honduras in the 1930s, Dario Euraque observes, “Unlike the Hondurans, and in fact unlike all other foreigners involved in San Pedro Sula’s elite commerce, by the 1930s the total Arab investments were distributed widely among many merchants and regions, not only in Cortés but elsewhere on the North Coast. . . None of the European or US citizens matched the range and distribution network established by the Arabs.”²¹⁵ Although the passage of time and integration into the host societies have weakened the close family ties in forming and maintaining business associations, Central American Palestinians have preserved, at least partially, the tradition of family and ethnic cooperation in their economic activities.

The liberal immigration policies of most Central American countries, especially Honduras, helped the increase in chain immigration of Palestinians and their relatives. As in other Central American countries, the liberal governments of Honduras promoted foreign immigration as a means to social, cultural, and economic progress. Although the intention of the nineteenth century liberals was to promote European and North American immigration, the 1866 and 1906 immigration laws in Honduras did not specify any race or nationality as “preferred” immigrants, and, as such, opened the country to immigrants from different backgrounds and nationalities, including Arabs.

Although the Honduran central government and local authorities, eager to attract foreign immigration to develop the economy, offered land grants to immigrants, most Palestinians chose commercial activities over agriculture for reasons discussed elsewhere in this chapter. They functioned as itinerant peddlers and salesmen roaming the rural areas and urban neighborhoods, selling household necessities to Honduran housewives and agricultural tools to farmers.

Most early Palestinian immigrants were educated in missionary schools in Palestine, especially in Bethlehem. Some who were involved in trade and tourism in the Holy Land had the ad-

vantage of familiarity with different languages. Jacobo Katan, a Palestinian merchant who arrived in San Pedro Sula in 1914, for example, spoke Arabic, English, French, Italian, and Spanish and served his diverse clients in different languages.²¹⁶ Also a majority of female Palestinian immigrants were educated before arriving in Honduras.²¹⁷

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Palestinian merchants were already in control of the commercial network of the city of San Pedro Sula. A review of taxes paid by shops in San Pedro Sula in 1918 reveals that about 47.5 percent of sales tax was paid by the city's Arab shop owners. Honduran shop owners accounted for only 2.5 percent of taxes.²¹⁸

Control of the San Pedro Sula commercial sector by Palestinians was firmly established by the 1930s. The list of owners of the city's most important commercial establishments included Larach, Canahuati, Sahuri, Saybe, Yacaman, Handal, Kawas, and other Palestinian names.²¹⁹ The Palestinian control over the commercial system was especially salient in the import/export sector. According to the Mercantile Registry of Cortés for 1919-1936 (Registro Mercantil de Cortés), Arabs controlled 67 percent of the investment value registered in the import and export sector of San Pedro Sula. Hondurans controlled only five percent.²²⁰ The only part of the commercial network controlled by the Hondurans was the network of neighborhood grocery stores in San Pedro Sula and other parts of the North Coast, which were heavily dependent on the supplies from larger general stores controlled by Palestinians.

In the 1920s, Palestinian merchants expanded their economic activities into small-scale industries and invested in the newly established industrial sector on the north coast. Most industrial establishments of San Pedro Sula in the 1920s and 1930s were joint ventures, but, when it came to individual investments in industry, the Arabs surpassed other immigrants and Honduran industrialists. The focus of most early Palestinian industrial activities was apparel production. In 1929, for example, the city's two most important textile factories belonged to Palestinians. One of them, Jacobo Kattan, who had lived in the city since 1914, established La Sampedrana, a business producing men's clothing. The other major factory, La Perfección, established in 1921, belonged to the Andonie Family.²²¹

Palestinian control over the commercial network of the north coast was later expanded to the rest of the country. Before WWII, German immigrants controlled a major part of the commercial network in central and southern parts of the country. During WWII, with the return of Germans to Europe, the Arab Palestinians practically gained control over the commercial system all over the country.²²² From 1937 to 1957, Arab merchants controlled 75 percent of investments in the import-export sector and about 50 percent of investments in manufacturing.²²³ High levels of investment gave Palestinians and their descendants major control of manufacturing employment. By the 1960s, "Arab-controlled factories in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa employed from 35% to 45% of Hon-

durans working in factory based manufacturing."²²⁴ Recently, Palestinian entrepreneurs have extended their reach into the free-zone industries, and names such as Juan Canahuati, Gabriel Kattan, George Mitri, and Roberto Handal appear at the top of the list of investors in the free-zone sector of the economy.²²⁵

Many Palestinian businesses in Honduras, both commercial establishments and industrial plants, are still family-based businesses. In almost every single interview, there was a reference to a brother or an uncle who had established a business in Central America and asked his brother or nephew to join him to run the business.

El Salvador is another showcase of economic success by Palestinian immigrants. Early Palestinian immigrants spread throughout the country and established commercial and agricultural enterprises in the provinces of San Salvador, San Miguel, Santa Ana, and La Unión. Just like in Honduras, early Palestinian immigrants in El Salvador filled the socioeconomic gap created by the outdated attitudes toward commercial activities among the Salvadoran elite. The local aristocracy had a long history of disdain for local commercial activities, which were considered socially degrading and not fit for a "nobleman." For the Creole hidalgo, living off his hacienda (large estate) or large-scale commerce, any menial job or small business was degrading and dishonorable.²²⁶

Most of the Palestinian immigrants to El Salvador became apparel and shoes merchants. There are also successful Palestinian businessmen in the food-processing sector. The Safie Family, for example, bought the Gerber Company in El Salvador. The Salume family, which arrived in El Salvador in 1914, opened a chain of supermarkets, and more recently, the very prosperous company called Distribuidora Salum. The Simán family became one of the wealthiest families in El Salvador. They own several large and modern shopping centers in up-scale neighborhoods of San Salvador, and have recently extended their chain of shopping malls to other Central American countries including Nicaragua. Palestinians and their descendants in El Salvador are also very successful in the financial sector of the country and have extended their reach to other Central American financial markets. Isa Miguel, a descendant of a Palestinian immigrant to El Salvador, for example, owns about 40 percent of the Banco de la Vivienda, in Guatemala.²²⁷ Some observers believe that the overwhelming majority of the estimated 90,000 Palestinian immigrants and their descendants in El Salvador belong to the top 5% of the economic scale.²²⁸

Discrimination

With the growing economic power of the Palestinian communities in the 1920s and 1930s, it was probably inevitable that the local elites would come to see them as economic rivals and try

to isolate them socially and politically. Because Palestinian success was most visible in Honduras, the situation was especially acute there. As Dario Euraque observes, “Even in the 1940s and 1950s most Hondurans did not perceive the Arab immigrants as ‘nationals,’ regardless of their economic position and regardless of their official status as settled and/or naturalized Honduran citizens.”²²⁹ Palestinians were not welcome in important social clubs in San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba, such as Lodge EUREKA no. 2 (of Freemasons), Casino Sampedrano, and Hipodromo. All these clubs were open to North American and European immigrants,²³⁰ but closed to Palestinians, even the rich and economically successful ones. According to many contemporary commentators, “Honduran officials had failed to administer immigration policy selectively, and instead of European immigration, Honduras received what Antonio Ochoa Alcántara called ‘exotic’ immigrants – Greeks, Chinese, and Palestinians who did not settle the land but rather limited their enterprise to stores and commercial operations in urban centers.”²³¹

The word *turcos* for Palestinian and other Arab immigrants, a misnomer arising from their Turkish (Ottoman) passports in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, became a social slur used by Central Americans resentful of their economic success. The term is still used to this day as an insult in parts of Central and South America.

Fueling resentments was the tight-knit nature of the Palestinian community. Perceiving their situation in Central America as temporary and intending to return home after accumulating sufficient wealth, most early Palestinian immigrants married Palestinians or other Arabs. Their businesses were family-owned, and they did not mingle much with Central Americans economically or socially. Their isolation, combined with their success, made them an easy target. By 1922, the influential Honduran daily *El Cronista* was able to demand the expulsion of the “*turcos*” from San Pedro Sula and elsewhere in the north coast on the grounds that they were “harmful to the country.”²³²

The onset of the Great Depression in 1929, which hit the export-oriented Central American economies hard, intensified the anti-immigrant sentiment, spawning the anti-immigration legislation, especially in Honduras and El Salvador. In Honduras, Article 8 of the new Regulations for Immigration Law of 2 September 1929 dictates that immigrants of “Arab, Turkish, Syrian, Armenian... [races] should bring a capital of five thousand silver pesos each, and make a deposit of five hundred silver pesos per person.”²³³ These laws were, at least partially, a response to complaints of the Honduran economic elite and their cultural agents, targeting the successful Palestinian merchant class. Even though the laws slowed the rate of new Palestinian immigration, anti-Palestinian voices continued to be raised. In the 1940s and 1950s, writings of middle-class Honduran intellectuals such as Antonio Ochoa Alcántara, Oscar A. Flores, and Adolfo Miranda helped inflame anti-Arab sentiments in the country. They criticized the government for its past liberal immigration laws and demanded additional tightening of immigration policies.²³⁴

El Salvador, like Honduras, was a showcase of economic success by Palestinian immigrants and had the second largest Palestinian community in Central America.²³⁵ And as had been the case in Honduras, their commercial success made them targets for discrimination. In 1936, the repressive dictatorship of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, who came to power in a 1931 military coup, passed Decree No. 49 (15 May 1936), the first of a series of discriminatory laws that forbade “persons of the Arab, Palestinian, Turkish, Chinese, Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, Persian, Hindu, and Armenian races, even though naturalized, to open new businesses of any type or even to participate in them as partners or to open branches of existing enterprises.”²³⁶ Article 40 of Decree No. 39 (24 July 1941) established a fine of 200 colons for officials of any municipality that permitted persons of the above races, regardless their nationality, to open or manage a commercial or industrial establishment.²³⁷ It is important to emphasize that the laws included the immigrants’ descendants born in El Salvador, as well as naturalized citizens.

In Guatemala, President Jorge Ubico (1931-1944) issued Decree No. 1813 on 4 May 1936, which forbade the opening of new commercial and industrial establishments, or branches of existing ones, “which are to be owned or directed by individuals of the following nationalities: Turks, Syrians, Lebanese, Arabs, Palestinians, Armenians, Egyptians, Persians, Afghans, Hindus, and Polish, as well as members of races originating in the African continent.”²³⁸

While the discriminatory laws of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala dated to the 1930s and 1940s, Costa Rica, which prides itself on a population claiming European ancestry, had long been determined to limit non-white immigration. In 1897, for example, the government prohibited the arrival of new Chinese immigrants,²³⁹ and in 1904 enacted Decree No. 1 (10 June 1904) barring entry to anyone of Arab, Armenian, Turkish, or Gypsy origin, regardless of their nationality.²⁴⁰ In 1930, another series of laws and regulations set additional limits on immigration and required foreign visitors to report their place of residence and activities to the government, although clauses allowed the authorities to exempt “honorable” [meaning white] foreigners from the regulations.²⁴¹ The restrictive immigration policies effectively prevented any significant Palestinian immigration to Costa Rica. In the early twentieth century, there were only two Palestinian immigrants in Costa Rica, Salvador Hasbun and Zacarías Bakit, both of whom had shops in Puerto Limón. Even as late as 1997, Roberto Marín Guzmán could document only 22 Palestinian families in the country.²⁴² Although the community today is economically successful and well-integrated into Costa Rican society, heavy restrictions against any new immigration from Palestine and other Arab countries remain in place.²⁴³

An unintended consequence of the anti-immigration/anti-Palestinian discrimination and legislation of the 1930s was to hasten the assimilation of the Palestinian community in the host countries. In Honduras, where during the early decades few Palestinians had opted for Honduran citizenship, the number of naturalizations increased rapidly following the new law as a means of avoiding the legal obstacles it created.²⁴⁴ In El Salvador, an additional consequence that was emphasized in

interviews was the new tendency among Palestinians in the 1930s and 1940s to try to conceal their ethnic identity and refrain from speaking Arabic outside their homes as a result of incidents against Palestinian youth speaking Arabic in public. This was one reason for the loss of the Arabic language among children of the immigrants.²⁴⁵ It is likely that the trend to marry outside the community was also hastened by the discrimination.

At present, descendants of early Palestinian immigrants are completely integrated into their host societies and are an important part of national life and social, political, and cultural institutions at all levels. Traditions such as intergroup marriages and concentrations of Palestinians in the same neighborhoods are few and far between. The price for Palestinians of full integration, however, has been the loss of their culture, especially the language and knowledge of their past. Today, the majority of Palestinian descendants marry non-Arabs; it is difficult to find Palestinian families without non-Palestinian members.²⁴⁶ Most Palestinian descendants do not speak Arabic, although they might use some Arabic words and phrases.

Palestinians and Politics in Central America

An important indicator of the success of Palestinian integration/assimilation in Central America – and a striking reversal of the social rejection and discrimination they had previously suffered – is the political prominence that Palestinian descendants have achieved in the adopted countries in the last few decades. This is particularly the case in Honduras and El Salvador where the Palestinian communities are largest. Thus, in December 1997, Honduran voters elected Carlos Flores Facussé, the son of a Palestinian mother, to the highest office in the land; his five-year term ended in 2002. Honduras also counts at least 12 deputies of Palestinian descent in its 120-member parliament, and Palestinian descendants have served as vice-president (William Handal), president of the Central Bank (Victoria Asfoura), and minister-at-large (Juan Bendeck).²⁴⁷ The current minister of foreign relations, Mario Miguel Canahuati, is also of Palestinian origin. In El Salvador, the grandson of Palestinian immigrants from Bethlehem, Elías Antonio Saca González, served as president from 2004 to 2009.

The majority of Palestinian immigrants and their descendants belong to the conservative current of Central American politics. In the region's sharp political divide, most wealthy business people, including Palestinian entrepreneurs, stand with the center-right political parties, which support the U.S. economic and political agenda in Central America. Former Honduran president Flores Facussé, for example, belonged to the center-right Liberal Party, while former Salvadoran president Saca was a leading member of right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Nationalist Republican Alliance), or ARENA, which governed El Salvador from 1989 to 2009 on an extremely conser-

vative political and economic platform.²⁴⁸ As president, Antonio Saca continued his party's pro-U.S. policies and even supported Salvadoran participation in the U.S. war in Iraq.

On the other hand, Palestinian communities in Central America have also generated important figures of the Left long engaged in the struggle for social justice in the region. The best-known is El Salvador's Schafik Handal,²⁴⁹ a Marxist and a former guerrilla commander, who was Antonio Saca's principal opponent in the 2004 presidential elections. Handal was the son of Palestinian immigrants from Bethlehem, but the politics of the two men could hardly be more different. Whereas Saca was an ardent anti-communist, Handal had close ties with Latin American revolutionary movements. In fact, the two men could be said to personally embody the Right/Left divide of Central American politics. Handal was instrumental in the 1980 formation of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), or FMLN, an alliance of Salvadoran revolutionary organizations that fought the right-wing, U.S.-armed and funded, Salvadoran government and military establishment in a long and vicious civil war that claimed some 75,000 lives. After the government and the FMLN signed a peace accord in 1992 that ended the civil war, Handal transformed his guerrilla army into a political party, which is today El Salvador's leading party on the Left. He was elected to parliament as the head of the FMLN party bloc before running unsuccessfully for president against Saca in 2004. He died in 2006 of a heart attack while returning home from the inauguration of Bolivia's newly elected left-wing president, Evo Morales. Such was Handal's popularity in the country that President Saca was obliged to call three days of national mourning.²⁵⁰ At his funeral, Handal's casket was wrapped in Salvadoran and Palestinian flags.²⁵¹

Although the Handal family originated in the merchant class, many of its members have been active in the country's leftist political formations and progressive organizations. Schafik's brother, Antonio Handal, was one of the thousands who "disappeared" by the Salvadoran regime in the 1980s, and another brother, Farid Handal, head of the Salvadoran Communist Party, was killed in combat in 1989.²⁵² Schafik's son, Jorge Schafik Handal Vega, also an FMLN leader, has served as an FMLN deputy in the Central American parliament.²⁵³

In Nicaragua, as in other Central American countries, most of the Palestinian immigrants historically were on the conservative side of the political divide. Most were assimilated into Nicaraguan society and involved in commerce. In general, the community, which was small,²⁵⁴ had established friendly relations with successive U.S.-supported Nicaraguan governments, including those of Anastasio Somoza García, who took power in 1936, and his son, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, who continued the family dictatorship that spawned the Sandinista revolution that triumphed in 1979. As immigrants, most Palestinians feared the regime and were concerned about losing their businesses or even being deported if identified as political opponents. Some were so close to the Somoza ruling circle that they had to leave the country following the Sandinista victory. Federico Frech, for example, was accused of being a member of Somoza's Office of National Security. Also, properties

of several wealthy Palestinian-Nicaraguans, including Mario Salha and Ali Khalil, were confiscated by the revolutionary government because of their ties to Somoza and his National Guard.²⁵⁵

As Moisés Hassan observed, the “majority of Palestinian immigrants were not supportive of the revolution because a lot of them did not identify themselves as Nicaraguan. For them, Nicaragua was a place where they lived and worked but did not have that much interest in national affairs. The only interest they had was that the government let them work. They were afraid if they said anything against Somoza, he would deport them from the country, or hurt their businesses. So the majority of them were very conservative. But the young Palestinians were in a different position. They identified as Nicaraguans and had a lot of nationalist sentiment about the country. They also were very sensitive about the situation in Palestine.”²⁵⁶

A number of young Palestinian-Nicaraguans joined the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front), or FSLN, in the 1970s, and some died fighting for the cause, including Selim Shible, Omar Hassan, Amín Halum, Mauricio Abdalah, and Soraya Hassan.²⁵⁷ Some of the Palestinian descendants who joined the revolutionary struggle were appointed to top positions in the revolutionary government in the 1980s, including Moisés Hassan, a member of the first revolutionary government, the National Directorate, and Suad Marcos Frech, a famous Nicaraguan poet, who had joined the Sandinistas at a very young age and became an officer in the Sandinista Army. Later, in the 1980s, she held a top position in the Interior Ministry. In the immediate wake of the triumph of the Nicaraguan revolution in 1979, Suad Marcos went to Beirut to join the Palestinian movement and remained there with the leadership of the PLO during Israel’s 1982 invasion of the country.²⁵⁸

In fact, soon after the Sandinista victory, the PLO opened an embassy in Managua, and Yasser Arafat visited the country for the first anniversary of the revolution. The Palestinian Embassy in Nicaragua today is the only one in Central America.

National Identity

The process of social, political, and cultural assimilation for the Central American Palestinian communities was slow and often painful. Even today, although Palestinian descendants born in Central America identify themselves as citizens of these countries, most of them refer to Palestine as their roots.

The anti-immigration laws of the 1930s virtually halted Palestinian immigration to Central America for some years. But the 1948 Nakba that accompanied Israel’s creation spawned

over 700,000 Palestinian refugees, some of whom sought to join relatives and friends in Central America. Israel’s 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip created another wave of refugees, some of whom went to Central America. In recent years, the flow of immigration directly from Palestine has intensified because of the worsening economic and political conditions in the occupied territories.²⁵⁹

Since their arrival in Honduras, the Palestinian immigrants have created organizations and associations for the community to preserve their cultural heritage, keep the community informed of the events in Palestine, and organize acts of solidarity with the Palestinian people. In San Pedro Sula, for example, as early as the 1930s, the Palestinian community formed an organization called Union Palestina. A few years later the Palestinian community in Tegucigalpa established Sociedad Union Juventud Árabe (Arab Youth Union Society), which later created similar entities in Mexico, Cuba, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. It published a weekly paper called “Rumbo” and began a radio program called “La hora árabe” transmitted by the Honduran National Radio.²⁶⁰

To preserve their religious and national heritage, the Palestinian community in San Pedro Sula established the first Orthodox Church in 1963, which became a major focus of the community. The Church later founded several predominantly Palestinian organizations, including the Comité Ortodoxo, the Comité de Damas Ortodoxas, and the Club Juvenil. In addition to these Church-related organizations, there is a Palestinian Sports Club (Club Deportivo Palestino), the Asociación Femenina Hondureña Árabe, the Centro Cultural Árabe, and FEARAB (Federación de Entidades Americano-Árabe). FEARAB is known for its political activities.²⁶¹

The Orthodox Church has also been involved in the political defense of Palestinians in the occupied territories, organizing special masses to commemorate the Palestinian victims of the Intifada, and has published paid statements in local papers in solidarity with Palestinians.²⁶²

Palestinian immigrants in El Salvador also tried to preserve their cultural heritage by creating organizations for the community. One of these organizations was the Club Palestino, which later was renamed Club El Prado. The organization gradually changed to a social club with a few elements of Arab culture, such as music and dance.²⁶³ Most of the descendants of Palestinian immigrants in El Salvador are completely assimilated in the local society and consider themselves Salvadorans. They do not speak Arabic and have not preserved Palestinian culture. In spite of their identification with El Salvador, some of the Palestinian descendants demonstrate a high degree of sensitivity toward and solidarity with the struggle of Palestinian people. In San Salvador, for example, the descendants of Palestinian immigrants have funded the construction of two monuments in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. Interviews with Palestinian descendants in Central American countries repeatedly pointed to a growing feeling of pride in the Palestinian heritage among the younger generation and a deep sense of sadness and anger about the events in Palestine.²⁶⁴ Solidarity

with Palestinian people is the common political ground among the community, which is otherwise deeply divided on political issues.

The arrival of new Palestinian immigrants from the homeland has created a continuous connection between Central America and Palestine. The newcomers, both Christian and Muslim, brought with them experiences of a suffering people under military occupation, which reinforced the older community's sense of connection with Palestine. According to anthropologist Nancie Gonzalez, "with every crisis between Arabs and Jews in Israel and the occupied territories, new emigrants arrive in Honduras, where their stories are avidly sought and repeated throughout the Palestinian community, both in San Pedro and elsewhere in the country."²⁶⁵ Political symbols of an independent Palestine, such as the Palestinian flag and resistance songs, have become popular among the early immigrants and their descendants in Central America, and solidarity with the struggle of the Palestinian people is on the rise in the region's diaspora communities.

The new arrivals, while trying to integrate into their host societies, are more motivated to preserve their Palestinian identity than earlier immigrants, probably because of the politicization and development of national identity that accompanies life under occupation or in the refugee camps. They do not see themselves as voluntary immigrants but as exiles, and, as such, are far more active in solidarity politics and the preservation of their culture as acts affirming their national identity.

Many of the new immigrants, especially after the 1967 war, are Muslim, and they have been particularly active in building community networks and organizing gatherings to celebrate and preserve national and religious events. The early Muslim Palestinian immigrants to Central America were unsuccessful in building their communities and preserving their culture and religion for reasons discussed earlier in this chapter. There was no mosque in Central America for Muslim Palestinians to continue their religious practices as a community or to teach their children the tenets of their religious beliefs. The situation changed when Muslim Palestinians began arriving in Central America following the 1967 war. The newcomers established mosques and have made efforts to teach their children Arabic and Islamic doctrine. Since most came directly from the occupied territories or from the refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, or Jordan, they kept in close contact with their relatives in the region, often maintaining secondary residences in the Middle East. It is not uncommon for Palestinian immigrants, especially Muslims, to send their children back to Palestine or to neighboring countries, such as Jordan, to attend school and learn Arabic and Islamic doctrine.²⁶⁶

For example, Muslims, who predominated in the post-1967 Palestinian immigration to Costa Rica, today constitute a prominent community in the country. They are highly educated professionals, enjoying wide respect in the country, and they have been active in preserving their cultural and religious heritage, partly through the Asociación Cultural Islámica de Costa

Rica (Islamic Cultural Association of Costa Rica), founded in 1994 by Dr. Abd al-Fattah Sa'sa, a Palestinian refugee from a camp in Jordan who arrived in 1973.²⁶⁷ Despite their small number, Costa Rica's Palestinian community is active in educating the local population on the situation in Palestine, organizing academic conferences and seminars at local universities and sponsoring political debates and radio programs on Palestine.²⁶⁸ The Palestinian community reportedly played a role in encouraging President Oscar Arias to move the Costa Rican Embassy from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv in the summer of 2006.²⁶⁹ Ten days later, El Salvador's President Saca followed suit, marking a diplomatic setback for Israel: Costa Rica and El Salvador had been the last two countries in the world maintaining embassies in Jerusalem, and their presence there had constituted recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, denied by the United Nations and other countries, including the United States, since 1948.

The new immigrants' commitment to the Palestinian struggle has injected new energy in the Palestinian communities in Central America. Everywhere in the region, solidarity with the Palestinian people has become the common political ground among immigrant communities, which are otherwise deeply divided on political issues. The construction of the Plaza Palestina in San Salvador in 2004 – just before the presidential elections that pitted two men of Palestinian origin, Antonio Saca and Schafik Handal, against each other – is a case in point. Although they belonged to the two extremes of the Salvadoran politics, both men supported and contributed to the Plaza. The commemorative plaque, which honors the "victims of Israel's creation in 1948" and features a map of pre-partition Palestine, bears their names as donors. This is another demonstration of the unity of Palestinian-Salvadorans on the issue of Palestine, although they belong to different, and often opposing, political factions in national politics.²⁷⁰ In 2005, Handal's FMLN party was responsible for a second memorial park in San Salvador, dedicated to the late Yaser Arafat. Plaza Arafat caused a diplomatic dispute, which resulted in Israel's withdrawing of its ambassador to El Salvador.²⁷¹

Conclusion:

Palestinian emigration to Central America came in two waves: the first, arriving in the early decades of the twentieth century, and the second in its later half. The first came as temporary emigrants were seeking economic opportunities but ultimately decided to settle, while the second came after the loss of their homeland when the Israeli state was created, and therefore knew from the beginning that theirs would be a permanent diaspora. The first passed through a difficult process of adjustment in their adopted countries stemming from cultural differences and an early resistance to social integration, and had to weather a long period of prejudice and discrimination fueled by their economic success. By the time the second wave began to arrive in substantial numbers (mainly

after 1967), the descendants of the Palestinians of the first wave had already achieved full assimilation and the highest degree of economic, social, and political success. But the more recent flow of immigrants made an important contribution to the established community; they reconnected it to Palestine and awakened it to the Palestinian national identity that had been emerging.

Today, most Palestinian descendants born in Central America, whether part of the earlier wave of immigration or the later one, identify themselves as citizens of their adopted countries. But as Gonzalez observed, “the additional Palestinian identification has never ceased to be important.”²⁷² John Nasser Hasbun, a Palestinian-Salvadoran and a member of the San Salvador City Council in 2007, explained his identity by saying, “I am proud to be Salvadoran, but I am also proud to be Palestinian.”²⁷³

A Century of Palestinian Immigration to Chile: A Successful Integration

Nicole Saffie Guevara and Lorenzo Agar Corbinos

Thousands of Arabs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries decided to leave their homeland in hope to find a better future. This was motivated by the persecution set forth by the Turkish Ottoman Empire, which recruited young Christians in their ranks to fight on the battlefield. Added to this were the poor living conditions and lack of opportunities for Christians who, according to the prevailing law, were not allowed to serve in public office. Having been considered a constitutive and privileged minority, this allowed them to live relatively better, and yet this status was also frowned upon by their Muslim neighbors. All of these factors led many Christians to undertake the long journey to an uncertain fate that could be as promising as America: a continent which, at that time, was a preferred destination for thousands of European immigrants who arrived thanks to the settlement acts a matter that did not favor the Palestinian immigrants.

Despite their eagerness to start a new life, the Arabs who were leaving their homeland did not know exactly what to expect in these distant lands. This notion is manifested in this small fragment from the novel “The Turks”:

- *Tell me Hannah, will you go far with me?*
- *Far? Where?*
- *To America.*
- *America?*
- *Yes, like the son of the baker Yuma. He has written to his brother and says he has made a fortune* ²⁷⁴

In the case of the Palestinians in Haifa and Jaffa, the adventure began when they boarded a boat carrying them to a European port, which was usually Genoa or Marseilles, and that was where they had their first contact with Western culture. It could be weeks or even months before they were able to buy a ticket to the much-coveted American continent, with little or no care as to where exactly they would arrive. The important thing was to get on board.

The journey was hard. The migrants had to buy a third-class passenger ticket or board cargo ships, where they were accommodated in between luggage. Despite the precariousness of the jour-