

them that opportunities in Egypt were better than in Palestine. They settled down and founded the Condor Cinema Film Company, which presented in May 1927, “A Kiss in the Desert”, the first silent Arabic film in the history of Egyptian cinema. In the thirties and forties, Lama Studios became one of the major cinema companies in Egypt.⁶¹

Though success stories of immigrants are documented and available, thousands of stories of failures are not, such as the stories of those who could not return home despite their deep love, as they did not possess even the fare to return to their homeland. They preferred the hardships of life and a slow death in the Diaspora, as dignity would not allow them to return as failures and to become a joke to their fellow Palestinians back home.

Political Participation and Economic Success of the Palestinians of Christian Origin in Central America

Roberto Marín-Guzmán

Introduction

At the end of the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century, many Arabs emigrated to different countries in the world. The motives for these movements were diverse, ranging from economic, political, religious, to social reasons. To emigrate was undoubtedly a brave decision full of challenges. However, many hoped to find in another land the ways to improve their economic situation, practice their religion freely, or flee from political persecution in their own countries. Many others probably had great expectations for commercial activities that would glean great profits. These were the major reasons for many Arabs - mainly Palestinians, Lebanese, and Syrians - to leave their homelands and move to faraway countries in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth. The purpose of this essay is to study the process of Palestinian immigration in the Central American republics. It will also analyze the different activities that the Palestinian immigrants of Christian origin and their descendants have engaged in these host countries, mainly their businesses, their industrial participation, and, finally, their financial strategies. The essay will also study their cultural contribution to the countries of Central America, as well as their political involvement as leaders in various administrative positions.

I will discuss the different periods of Palestinian immigration in Central America that presented diverse kinds of people to the region – people of different religions, social status, and cultural backgrounds – and this diversity certainly influenced their ultimate occupations in the five host countries, the traditional Central American republics. Undoubtedly, the majority of the first Palestinian immigrants at the turn of the century and during the first decades of the twentieth century were predominantly Christians of rural origin. They settled mainly in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, with very few in Costa Rica. It is also important to point out that more recently, after the establishment of the State of Israel, and especially after the Six Days War of 1967, more Palestinians have arrived in Central America. In this more recent period of immigration, most of them are Muslims as opposed to those of Christian origin who characterized the previous emigration periods.

Palestinian immigrants of Christian origin have also had a political involvement in defence of the rights of the Palestinian people, and they have especially been active in Costa Rica and in Honduras. This essay will analyze these issues as well, and, finally, it will deal with the issue of assimilation of the Palestinian descendants into the societies of the host countries.

Through the various issues analyzed in this essay, one could obtain a major picture of the impact and political participation of the Palestinian immigrants of Christian background in the different nations of Central America.

Palestinian Immigration of Christian Origin in Central America: Analysis of Cases

The first Palestinian immigrants in Central America arrived in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century when the Ottoman Empire still existed. Because of their arrival to Central America with Ottoman passports, many identified them as Turks. This still persists in the popular mind, which considers the Arab immigrants who arrived in this region with Ottoman documents as Turks. The same happened with many Lebanese and other Syrian Arab immigrants who reached Latin America during the Ottoman domination of the Arab Levant.

In the first period of immigration (from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the outbreak of World War I in 1914), the Palestinians of Christian faith settled in the different countries of the isthmus, with very few in Costa Rica. Many Palestinians started emigrating as early as the 1860s to different countries in the world with the intention of profiting from wood and mother-of-pearl craftsmanship.⁶² In the 1890s, they started arriving to Central America because they had heard that in this region people would eagerly buy their handicrafts, as well as many other objects manufactured in the Holy Land. There are some oral traditions which indicate that many Palestinians of Christian origin first entered El Salvador. One oral tradition affirms that the first Palestinian who arrived to the isthmus, of whom neither his name nor his exact place of origin is provided, entered El Salvador by the port of Cutuco and left by the port of Acajutla, bound for another country in the area. The same has been confirmed by some of the descendants of Palestinian immigrants in San Pedro Sula, who stated that many of their ancestors stayed first in El Salvador before going over, by land, to Honduras.

In general terms, the Palestinians settled mainly in Honduras (where they arrived in large numbers,) then in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and, finally, in Guatemala during the first period of the immigration. Very few settled in Costa Rica. To this last country they arrived in larger numbers much later.⁶³ The following table of the number of Palestinian family names in Central America clearly illustrates this process:

Table No. 1:

Number of Palestinian last names found by travelers in Central America⁶⁴ (until 1955)

Country	Number of last names
Honduras	255
El Salvador	199
Nicaragua	25
Guatemala	23
Costa Rica	2
Total	504

Source: Nasri Salomón Jacir, Boletín de la Sociedad Caritativa de Belén, Commercial Press, Jerusalem, 1955-57, quoted by Nancie González, Dollar, Dove and Eagle. One Hundred Years of Palestinian Migration to Honduras, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1992, p.62, information extended and adapted by the author.

The Case of the Palestinians of Christian Origin in Honduras

The Palestinian immigrants of Christian origin in Honduras started arriving towards the end of the nineteenth century, the first case being recorded in 1899. After some isolated instances, the Palestinians, mainly from Bethlehem and the villages of Beit Sahur and Beit Jala (Ephrata region), arrived in Honduras in greater numbers and in a more systematic way, coinciding in 1906 with the Honduran government approval of a series of laws that were favorable for the immigrants. The period of the greatest Palestinian immigration to Honduras was from 1922 to 1931. Shortly afterwards, it declined due to the Depression of the 1930s, even though the immigration process to this country never completely stopped. Some Palestinians of Christian origin went to Honduras to visit relatives and to work for a period of time, hoping to return rich to Palestine.

Due to the 1929 Depression and parallel to these economic difficulties, several laws were approved in Honduras, in 1929 and 1934, tending to restrict the arrival of foreign immigrants, including the Palestinians. Those who arrived during the time these laws were in force had to pay extremely high prices for the right of immigration and many, as part of the new migratory policies, were forced to devote themselves to agriculture or to create new industries.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the British Mandate of Palestine encouraged the return of the Palestinian emigrants and restricted the exodus of many more. For this purpose the British authorities created new job opportunities, as is shown for those years by The Statistical Abstract of Palestine.⁶⁶ For the period of 1933-1934 there were in Honduras 592 Palestinians, the majority of Christian origin, documented as foreign residents. The number reached 812 in 1936-1937, to which clandestine immigration needs to be added.⁶⁷ Yet by the early 1930s, the Palestinian immigrants of Christian origin had already been very successful in commerce and in industry. As an example of their assimilation they even published

their own weekly newspaper in Spanish, called *El Eco de Palestina*. In 1930, there were in Honduras 58 clothing factories, of which 20 belonged to Palestinian immigrants, among which *La Perfección* and *La Sampedrana*, both in San Pedro Sula, were the major ones.⁶⁸ *La Perfección*, for example, had 91 sewing machines, and gave jobs to 112 female workers in the textile industry. According to the statistics of the census, Palestinian immigrants of Christian origin controlled the major business in San Pedro Sula, El Progreso, Tela, La Ceiba, and other cities in 1931.⁶⁹

The majority of these immigrants were Christians practicing Orthodox rites, even though some studies reveal that between 15 and 20 per cent of them were Muslim. Due to the paucity of records registering them as Muslim, it is possible to assume that they had either left silently without revealing their religion or that they converted to Christianity after their arrival in Central America;⁷⁰ as only 17 Muslim Palestinian families could be determined to be in Honduras. Undoubtedly, the Palestinian Muslims remain as a separate group from the other Palestinians, sharing with them neither family, nor places of origin, nor religion. It is likely that the number of Palestinian Muslims in Honduras has increased, but data are uncertain.

I will now turn to explain the ways Palestinian immigrants arrived in Honduras, the jobs and business opportunities that the country offered them, and their economic success mainly in the northern coast of the country. I will also analyze their political and cultural participation, as well as their assimilation to the Honduran society.

The northern coast of Honduras underwent enormous economic transformations from the 1870s onward mostly related to banana plantations. Because the country required a great number of services in this area, and due to its rapid development, this province attracted investors, producers, and merchants. Among them were the Palestinians, along with many other foreigners.⁷¹ The Palestinians, mainly of Christian origin, started some commercial enterprises in this area. Very few of them cultivated bananas or worked for the banana companies on the plantations.⁷²

In the first years after their arrival to the northern coast of Honduras at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Palestinians of Christian origin settled near the ports of La Lima, El Progreso, and Puerto Cortés, where there was great economic flux.⁷³ Because of this, the first Palestinian immigrants did not invest much money during these early times in big, luxurious, or comfortable houses, but rather lived in a very modest way. When traveling through rural areas to sell their products as itinerants, single men usually rented a room and, frequently, just a bed. These itinerant commerce practices were observed in 1928 by traveler Karl Sapper.⁷⁴ After marriage, the Palestinians usually obtained a house for their families, almost always above or behind their stores.

Although the Palestinian immigrants of Christian origin settled in many other towns and cities, San Pedro Sula has undoubtedly been one of the most important centers for their businesses.

They also lived in La Ceiba and Trujillo. They contributed from the beginning to the progress of the northern coast of Honduras. It is not clear if the city of San Pedro Sula grew so fast because of the work and businesses of the Palestinian immigrants, or if its growth had been the main attraction that led the Palestinian immigrants to settle in this city and its surrounding areas. The Palestinian immigrants also went to a great number of small towns, especially those along the railroad lines, where they took many products like food, clothes, and the necessary tools for banana production. Among the most important towns where they lived were: Santa Rita, Villa Nueva, Pimienta, San Manuel, El Porvenir, Olanchito, El Urraco, Chamelecón, Cofradía, and Choloma. The fact that they had settled in towns did not reduce their itinerant commercial activity, which they continued to practice, especially at long distance. At the beginning of the century, communication difficulties forced many Palestinians to walk great distances and then use canoes to reach certain places. They employed mules for other locations, and finally, also, trains where they existed. These transportation hardships made the products the Palestinians carried even more expensive, thus making the profits even greater.⁷⁵ In 1988 and still today there is evidence that some Palestinians practice itinerant commerce and carry certain products by automobile to other towns and cities. Frequently, they sold their products on credit to their customers.⁷⁶ After 1948, the Palestinians noticed that returning to Palestine was even more uncertain than before. Since then, many who had not already done so, decided to invest massively and to settle permanently in Central America.

The Palestinian immigrants created, in a gradual process from 1900 to the present, a great number of businesses which generated new and important job opportunities for many people. For the period between 1900-1949 in the Department of Cortés, it was the Palestinians who, after the Hondurans of Spanish and other European descent, had the greatest number of businesses, which were bigger and more important than those of many other Central Americans.

In the Department of Cortés during the period 1900 to 1950, forty per cent of the investments came from Palestinian immigrants.⁷⁷ In the case of San Pedro Sula, between 1900 and 1986, Palestinian businessmen managed to reach seventy five per cent of the stores facing the six most important blocks in the commercial district. Furthermore, Palestinians own twenty seven per cent of the 900 stores located in the total San Pedro Sula commercial district. Likewise, they own fifty per cent of the existing hardware stores in the commercial district of this city. These data prove the prosperity of their economy. To all of this, one has to add that the Palestinians in these areas of Honduras were also buying land, especially during World War II. Since then, property values have risen rapidly.⁷⁸

In their economic activities, the Palestinians in Honduras followed the tradition of forming family businesses, both in commerce and in industry. There are countless references to brothers or nephews moving to Honduras to join a business that an older brother or an uncle had started years earlier.⁷⁹ Some immigrants in Honduras returned to Palestine to find new assistants among their

relatives. Others frequently went to find a wife, usually related through patrilineal ties, which explains why endogamy was common among Palestinian immigrants in Honduras in the early periods of immigration.⁸⁰

Women have always been very active in economic occupations and were helping their husbands in the family businesses. In Palestinian businesses there has been a clearly recognizable tendency to seek partners, in the first place, among relatives. For the period between 1948-1988, calculations show this tendency in fifty one per cent of the cases. The partnership with other Arab non-relatives during the same period reached 10.6 per cent, while it reached 38.4 per cent with other non-Arabs.⁸¹ Today in Honduras exists a very prosperous textile industry which belongs to the Palestinian Christian Kattan family. This factory is located in Choloma, in the Departamento de Cortés, and it offers new jobs and wealth to the country.⁸² In the 1990s, the Kattan Group opened the free trade zone named Inhdelva, which by the year 2010 has attracted 30 companies. These companies rent 20 different buildings in Inhdelva from the Kattan Group. Inside this free trade zone, the Kattan Group has established six of its seven textile plants. These plants have been producing for well-known brands such as Van Heusen, Tommy Hilfiger, Arrow, Chaps, Izod, DKNY, Donald Trump, Oxford, Men's Warehouse, Hanes, Gildan, Gap, Ralph Lauren, Vanity Fair, Dickies, Nike, JC Penny, Best Uniforms, and Bass.⁸³ These textile plants have created 3,000 new jobs in the country, being therefore one of the major companies for the labor market in Honduras. In 2008-2009, this company was the major shirt-producer in Latin America.⁸⁴ The statistics for the year 2010 are not yet available.

Palestinians in Honduras live in a confluence of cultures. Many Palestinians, or their descendants, continue to build houses following traditional Middle Eastern customs, using flat roofs, and arched windows and doors. There are also a great number of typically Arab products for sale in the markets, such as cardamom, pistachios, figs, olives, grape leaves, sunflower seeds, etc. In visits to friends or relatives, the Palestinian forms of courtesy and hospitality are followed, mingled with those of Honduras. For example, in Honduras, to serve coffee at the beginning of a visit does not convey the message, as in Arab society, that the visitor must leave. It rather is a sign of Latin American tradition of hospitality.⁸⁵

Palestinian descendants frequently play Middle Eastern music in their festivities, celebrations, weddings, baptisms, and birthdays. Usually there are also "belly dancers" at their parties. The cultural confluence is observed in that they often combine Arab music with other kinds of music in their celebrations. The ornaments of wooden saints and icons, following the traditional forms of Middle Eastern Orthodox Christians, are combined with some Mayan Indian decorations.

Palestinian immigrants in Honduras have founded several associations with the purpose of preserving some of their traditions and maintaining their unity. Among these organizations are

those related to the Orthodox religion: the Orthodox Committee (Comité Ortodoxo), the Orthodox Ladies' Committee (Comité de Damas Ortodoxas), and the Juvenile Club (Club Juvenil).

The majority of the Palestinian immigrants in Honduras are Greek Orthodox and belong to the first Orthodox Church of Central America (founded in San Pedro Sula in 1963) which they consider the only purely Arab institution in Honduras.⁸⁶ This Church still maintains the same traditions as the Orthodox churches in the Middle East, such as the use of icons, hanging lamps, as well as other traditional decorations and religious practices indigenous to the Middle East. Amongst them, for example, is the use of the Julian calendar instead of the Gregorian. The Orthodox Church in Honduras has also had a distinguished political participation in the defense of the rights of the Palestinian people. It has collected large sums of money to help Palestinian refugees in the Middle East. The Church frequently holds masses for the martyrs of the Intifada (1987-1993 and 2000 to the present) and often buys complete pages in the local newspapers to advocate for the defense of the Palestinians. One influential name in this respect is Jorge Larach who, besides being a businessman who has invested in industry, also happens to be the owner of two of the major newspapers in Honduras, among them *La Prensa*, which has the largest circulation in Honduras.⁸⁷ *La Prensa* often publishes articles in defense of the rights of the Palestinians.

Among the other associations, there is the Palestinian Sports Club (Club Deportivo Palestino), the Honduran Feminine Arab Association (Asociación Femenina Hondureña Árabe) which is essentially a social group for chatting, listening to Arab music, and enjoying Arab dances, and the Honduran-Arab Cultural Center (Centro Cultural Hondureño Árabe) which has hosted recreational activities for the Palestinian families such as dances, picnics, and social gatherings. One of these centers also exists in Tegucigalpa.⁸⁸ Another association in which Palestinians also participated in is the Federation of American Arab Entities (FEARAB by its Spanish name, Federación de Entidades Americano-Árabe), which is made up of like-minded men regarding political views and actions. Many Hondurans believed back in the 1980s and 1990s that some of the members of FEARAB were fanatics and that they were even supporters of some of the factions of the PLO.⁸⁹

The Bethlehemite Palestinians founded the Bethlehemite Association in Philadelphia in 1985 with the purpose of publishing information about the happenings in Bethlehem and in the Ephrata region in general. This association has also informed its members of the development of the Intifada, and gave updates about the deaths, births, and weddings of its members. Many Honduran-Palestinians belong to this association, and it will probably have a headquarter in San Pedro Sula with similar purposes in the near future.⁹⁰ The Palestinians of Christian origin have also organized an economic association called Investments Inc.

In general terms, Palestinian descendants in Honduras are integrated into the society of this country, as is proven by the participation of many of them in the most diverse fields including the

professional, cultural, sports, etc. The economic area, however, is the one to which they have given their major contribution. It is important to point out that Palestinian descendants have not gone into the fields of law or to the academy, as demonstrated by Nancie González.⁹¹ Some have participated actively in politics, such as Emin Abufele, a leader in the Partido Nacional, and Carlos Kattan who was a congressman representing the people of the Departamento de Cortés.⁹² Carlos Flores-Facusse ran for the Presidency of the Republic twice, as candidate of the Partido Liberal, and was elected President of Honduras for the period 1998-2002.⁹³ Many others have reached important positions as officers of the Honduran army.⁹⁴

Second and subsequent generations of Palestinians do not speak Arabic. They consider themselves Hondurans and are totally assimilated into this country. Some of them are Catholics, like the majority of Hondurans, even though the majority still practice the Orthodox religion. With that being said, many of the Palestinian descendants are interested in preserving Palestinian traditions and customs. Palestinians and their descendants in Honduras have also demonstrated an enormous and serious interest in the defense of the rights of the Palestinian people. This fervor is fed by information gathered first hand; that is to say, from new Palestinian immigrants who have arrived in recent years, especially after the rise of the second Intifada of 2000. Many immigrants have arrived recently to Honduras from the two Palestinian towns of Beit Sahur and Beit Jala, which have become real symbols of the Palestinian resistance.

The Case of the Palestinians of Christian Origin in El Salvador

The arrival of Palestinian immigrants in El Salvador, from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, coincided with their immigration in Honduras. It is for this reason that many Palestinian families in El Salvador have relatives in Honduras, as is the case of the Handal, Siman, Salume, and other families.⁹⁵ The greatest Palestinian immigration period in El Salvador was from 1910 to 1925, with estimates on the number of Palestinian families being uncertain. An exact count is very difficult - some scholars believe it is impossible - since records frequently are scarce or non-existent.⁹⁶ Most of the Palestinian immigrants came from the area of Bethlehem as Orthodox Christians who had worked in agriculture for several generations. Some of them were also merchants before their exodus. Their arrival in El Salvador opened new economic opportunities for them and they rose on the social ladder quickly, taking advantage of the good opportunities and, undoubtedly, not without great personal effort.

The Palestinian immigrants in El Salvador settled all over the country, especially in San Salvador, San Miguel, Santa Ana, and La Unión. From the earliest times, they became merchants, and their major commerce was, above all, to sell clothing and footwear. The Handal family in La

Unión in the eastern part of the country developed other economic activities, mainly the exploitation of salt mines; a business they have kept up to the present day. Others, like the Khouri family, concentrated on agriculture, especially cotton, which they cultivated in the San Miguel area. They have also had great prosperity in this business. Other Palestinians have gone into the food business. The Safie family, for example, bought the baby food Gerber Industry, while the Salume, who arrived in El Salvador in 1914, have a super market chain. More recently they have devoted themselves to the wholesale business in an enterprise called Distribuidora Salume (Salume Distributing).⁹⁷ Some other Palestinian descendants have become so prosperous that they have been able to establish their own Shopping Centers, as the case of the Galerías Escalón of the Siman family.⁹⁸ Other Palestinian descendants have practiced diverse activities like the case of the Salume family, which has the leather tanning business and owns a great number of leather shops in El Salvador. Other members of the Salume family moved to Guatemala, where they have founded some instant coffee factories. 'Isa Miguel in El Salvador has had both domestic and international financial business, and nowadays he has also invested in Banco de la Vivienda (Housing Bank) in Guatemala.⁹⁹ As a consequence of their economic successes, Palestinian immigrants have been able to buy houses and other properties since the earliest times in the posh residential zone of La Flor Blanca. When this neighborhood became heavily commercial, Palestinian immigrants moved to other residential neighborhoods, like El Escalón, towards the mountains, because the city of San Salvador has extended in that direction.

Since early times, Palestinian immigrants and their descendants were interested in maintaining the group unity and preserving many of their traditions and customs. For this reason they founded the Club Palestino, (The Palestinian Club) later known as the Club El Prado. Despite repeated attempts to teach Arabic and to develop cultural activities, these projects have failed as much in the Club Palestino as in the Club El Prado. This has been due to the lack of a favorable response from the Palestinian-Salvadoran community. The Club has rather turned into a center for social gatherings where only a few cultural traditions, such as Arab music and dances, are preserved.¹⁰⁰

Nowadays, Palestinian descendants in El Salvador are totally assimilated into the society of their host nation. They do not speak Arabic anymore and they consider themselves Salvadorans. Palestinian descendants can be found in all professional fields and in all activities and businesses. There are merchants, industrialists, physicians, lawyers, engineers, and so on. Nevertheless, this assimilation process was not an easy one in El Salvador, since there were many restrictions in the past, both for Palestinian immigrants and for their descendants as well. Despite that, many Palestinian-Salvadorans have been able to participate in politics and have occupied some important administrative positions, like the cases of José Arturo Zablah, who was Minister of Economy from 1989 to 1993.¹⁰¹ Another example is Eduardo Zablah Touche, who was Minister of Economy of El Salvador from 1994 to 1998.¹⁰² Two Palestinian descendants occupied the prestigious position of Mayor of Zacatecoluca: Jaime Fagrer, from 1924 to 1925; and Federico Alberto Hirezi, from 1953 to 1956.¹⁰³ José Zablah was director of CEPA (Comisión Ejecutiva Portuaria Autónoma) from 1994 to 1998.¹⁰⁴

The president of ANTEL (Administración Nacional de Telecomunicaciones) was also of Palestinian background, Juan José Dabdoub ‘Abdallah.¹⁰⁵

The political problems in El Salvador and the guerrilla warfare that deeply affected this country during the 1980s had profound repercussions on Palestinian descendants.¹⁰⁶ Some were victims of terrorist actions and the guerilla warfare and were wounded. Others, less fortunate, died in those violent actions. This provoked a great exodus of Palestinian descendants from El Salvador to other countries in the area and to Miami. On the other hand, some Palestinian descendants in El Salvador identified themselves with the opposition groups and participated in the guerrilla warfare against the Salvadoran government. Among them is the case of Shafik Handal, a lawyer and expert in international politics, who was a member of the guerrillas in El Salvador for a number of years, mainly from the beginning of the civil war in 1980 to the peace accords in 1992.¹⁰⁷ This was also the case for some Palestinian descendants in Nicaragua who participated in the Sandinista revolution against the Somoza government and also supported the Palestinian revolution. In El Salvador many Palestinian descendants also agreed with the Palestinian revolution. Among them was the already mentioned Shafik Handal, who also was a member of the Salvadoran Communist Party and who occupied the important position of General Secretary of the party.¹⁰⁸ Shafik Handal became the hard line negotiator for the Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN) with the Salvadoran government, led at the time by President Alfredo Cristiani.¹⁰⁹ Shafik Handal insisted that for the negotiations the Salvadoran armed forces should be reduced and transformed.¹¹⁰ Handal was also one of the leaders responsible for changing the armed guerrillas into a political group, once they had disposed of their weapons. All of this was known during the negotiations between the guerrilla members and the representatives of the Cristiani administration, who met several times in San José, Costa Rica, in 1990.¹¹¹

The signed peace agreement between the Salvadoran government and the guerrilla groups in 1987 and finally on 16 January 1992,¹¹² has opened a few new opportunities for the Palestinian-Salvadorans who were going back to the country. Shortly afterwards, Shafik Handal was a candidate for the Presidency of the Republic in 2004. However, another descendant of Palestinian immigrants in El Salvador, Antonio Saca, won the election as member of the official Partido Arena and became the first president of El Salvador of Palestinian descent. He was president from 2004 to 2009. His government was characterized by the right wing ideology and he was a clear defender of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) with the United States. However, intellectuals both in El Salvador and in Costa Rica strongly and bravely opposed the CAFTA, unfortunately to no avail.

During the Saca administration, there were two Salvadoran-Palestinians elected as congressmen from 2004 to 2009. They were Héctor Miguel Dada Hirezi (Partido Cambio Democrático) from San Salvador and Óscar Abraham Kattan Milla from Sonsonate. Likewise, Gerard Nass-

er Hasbun, a Salvadoran-Palestinian, was Deputy Mayor of the Municipality of San Salvador from 2006-2009.¹¹³

There were also some Palestinian-Salvadorans who moved to other Central American countries, such as Nijmeh (Estrella) Mu’ammam, who settled in Costa Rica along with her family. Her sons have recently returned to El Salvador to start various businesses.¹¹⁴ In general, the most important contribution of the Palestinians in El Salvador has been at the economic level, for their clothing, footwear, and food businesses; their textile and salt industries; and their agricultural production in their lands. They have actively and successfully participated in politics and have also contributed at the financial level.

The Case of the Palestinians of Christian Origin in Nicaragua

It is hard to determine the number of Palestinians arriving in Nicaragua during the first decades of the twentieth century. Records are scarce, confusing, and erroneous about the Turkish nationality attributed to many of them. Our informants point out that it is possible to think that from the end of the nineteenth century until 1917 (during World War I), when the Ottoman Empire was in its final decline, 40 Palestinian families arrived in Nicaragua.¹¹⁵ Nowadays, it is estimated that there are over 500 families of Palestinians and Palestinian descendants.¹¹⁶

The Palestinian immigrants in Nicaragua were mostly Christians. Some Muslims also arrived, although in smaller numbers, since only the Hasan and ‘Abdallah families are known.¹¹⁷ Palestinian immigrants in Nicaragua came from rural areas, mainly from villages near Ramallah and Jerusalem, as well as from Beit Jala and Bethlehem. Among the Palestinian Christians who arrived in Nicaragua was the family of the distinguished Palestinian-Nicaraguan poetess Suad Marcos Frech.¹¹⁸ Some members of this family came from Bethlehem and others from Jerusalem. Among many other cities are the families of the Zogaib, Dajer, Farach, Karam, Aquel, Salty, Zarruk, and Hasbani.¹¹⁹

In spite of their rural origins and experience in agricultural work, Palestinian immigrants in Nicaragua devoted themselves to commerce, mainly clothing, footwear, and ornaments. Their trade activities brought them great profits. In Nicaragua, Palestinian immigrants settled in the main cities of Managua, Granada, and Masaya, where they founded their stores. As an example of a Palestinian family devoted to this activity, one can mention, among many other cases, that of the grandparents of Suad Marcos Frech, who were merchants in Managua.¹²⁰ Some of the most important stores founded by Palestinian immigrants or their descendants are: Tienda París Londres, Camisería Marcos, Almacén Dajer, La Media Luna, and Almacén Mónaco.¹²¹ Only a small group of Palestinian immigrants, however, was able to buy land and to concentrate on agriculture,

mainly in Sabana Grande, where from their earliest arrival they have produced cotton as well as various fruits such as manga china.¹²² It is important to point out that later some of the Palestinian immigrants developed other economic interests such as manufacturing, mainly the textile industry. The Samara and Shijab¹²³ families are some examples of Palestinian families who have also devoted themselves to the textile industry. Furthermore, there are other industries, such as tomato sauce production.¹²⁴

Since the end of the 1950s, Palestinians in Nicaragua started a club called Club Árabe (Arab Club), which was founded on 15 May 1958 with the purpose to attract other non-Palestinian Arabs. Even though about 80 per cent of the members of this club were Palestinians, there also were, according to our informants, some Syrians and some Lebanese.¹²⁵ This club allowed the Palestinian descendants in Nicaragua to preserve a certain cultural identity and to keep alive their ethnic origins.¹²⁶ This also seems to have been the tendency of some Palestinian-Nicaraguans who traveled to Palestine to obtain an education, as in the cases of Jacobo Marcos and Jorge Jacobo Marcos Bendeck.¹²⁷ There they acquired a clear political knowledge, a basic understanding of the Palestinian problems, and the need to defend the rights of the Palestinian people.¹²⁸ The same is also true for 'Issa Frech, who went to Palestine from 1972 to 1976 to learn Arabic.¹²⁹

The second and third generations of Palestinians in Nicaragua are for the most part professionals. They have married Nicaraguan nationals and have Nicaraguan nationality. They no longer speak Arabic and are totally integrated into Nicaraguan society. Some members of the 'Abdallah family, for example, married women from Masaya and, in spite of being Muslims, their children were raised as Catholics, which is an indication of the rapid assimilation process in this host country. Among the professionals, there are engineers such as Carlos Zarruk, Salvador 'Abdallah, and Musa Hasan, the last of which even managed to occupy the prestigious office of Dean of the Faculty of Engineering¹³⁰ in the Universidad de Nicaragua in the 1970s.¹³¹ There are also neurosurgeons and physicians, as in the cases of doctors Jacobo Marcos Frech, Moisés Hasan, Amín Hasan, Foad Hasan, William 'Abdallah, William Yudat Frech, and others; lawyers, as in the case of James Zablah; journalists like Anuar Hasan; and writers such as the poetess Suad Marcos Frech.¹³²

It is important to underline the enormous political conscience of the Palestinians as a group in Nicaragua. Palestinians in this country, as in others, are clearly conscious of the sufferings of their Palestinian ancestors and relatives who have faced persecutions, discrimination, expulsions, and property and goods confiscation¹³³ by the Israeli military occupation of their territories.¹³⁴ For these reasons the Palestinian descendants in Nicaragua have also participated actively in Nicaraguan politics. Both the second and third generations of Palestinian immigrants in Nicaragua involved themselves directly in the struggle against the social and political injustices of the Anastasio Somoza Debayle regime (1967-1972 and 1974-1979). Some Palestinian descendants in Nicaragua, like Selim and Alberto Shibli, participated actively on the side of the Sandinistas before this group

defeated the Somocistas and took power in June 1979. The same can also be pointed out with regard to the important role that the Palestinian-Nicaraguan poetess Suad Marcos Frech played in favor of the Sandinista revolution.¹³⁵

Some Palestinian descendants came to occupy important administrative positions within the Sandinista Government Junta, as in the case of Musa Hasan. Others occupied ministerial positions: Jacobo Marcos Frech was Secretario General (General Secretary), position equivalent to Vice-Minister, in the Ministry of Health, from 1979 to 1982.¹³⁶ Carlos Zarruk was Defense Minister, James Zablah was Minister of Economy, and Suad Marcos Frech was Subdirectora of the National Penitentiary System, an office that belongs to the Ministry of the Interior, from 1979 to 1980.¹³⁷ Another Palestinian descendant who occupied an important administrative and political position was Sucre Frech, who was Sports Minister. He died in 1991.¹³⁸ Yasser 'Arafat, then president of the PLO, even sent a letter of condolence from Tunisia to Sucre's family, dated 29 January 1991.¹³⁹

On the other hand, the confiscations and the nationalization process of the Sandinista government forced the exodus of some Palestinian-Nicaraguans, as in the case of the Samara family, who affirmed to have lost properties and businesses that were confiscated by that regime. The Samara family then moved to Costa Rica where they have a business in clothing, footwear, and other items.

The Sandinistas opened for the first time a PLO diplomatic representation in Managua (1981), the first diplomatic seat of the Palestinian representation in Central America, which was until recently the only one. This diplomatic seat reflects the changes, views, and perceptions of Nicaragua in the international sphere towards the defense of the rights of the Palestinian people. As a contrast, other countries in the area, namely Costa Rica¹⁴⁰ and El Salvador, moved their Embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in the early 1980s, acknowledging this city as the capital of Israel. These two Embassies in Jerusalem passively supported the legality of a military occupation in detriment of the Palestinian rights and in clear opposition to the United Nations accords that call for the internationalization of Jerusalem.¹⁴¹ However, in 2006, Costa Rica, later followed by El Salvador, moved their Embassies back to Tel Aviv, complying with the numerous United Nations resolutions, and with a strong determination to advocate the rights of the Palestinian people. This political change also meant a rejection of the Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian territories, as well as a protest against the Israeli military abuses and constant violation of human rights in Palestine. The PLO's representation in Managua continues today with five assigned functionaries, which constitutes a reduced number. At the times of the Sandinistas, this Palestinian diplomatic office had up to thirty members. Four leading functionaries of the Palestinian diplomatic office in Managua have fulfilled important tasks in Nicaragua: Marwan Tarbub (from 1981 to 1989), 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Aftal (1989-1990), Musa Amer Odeh (1990-1992), George 'Issa Salamah (1992), and Walid al-Mu'aqat (2008 to the present).¹⁴²

The Case of the Palestinians of Christian Origin in Costa Rica

Arab immigrants in Costa Rica during the first period of immigration, from the late nineteenth century until World War I, and during the second period between the World Wars, included mainly Lebanese and Syrians. Very few Palestinians of Christian origin came to Costa Rica during these two periods of immigration. Only Rafael Zakariyya (Zacarías) Bakit (Bakhit), ‘Isa Ibrahim (Salvador Abraham) Hasbun Hasbun and his cousin ‘Isa (Salvador) Jorge Hasbun are known to have arrived. Rafael Zacarías Bakit (Bakhit), who came from ‘Ayn Karim, near Jerusalem, arrived in 1909 with his brother.¹⁴³ Both started a business in Puerto Limón, but when his brother returned to Palestine, Zacarías moved to San José where he took up the representation of foreign pharmaceutical houses, a job he successfully performed because, among many other reasons, he was fluent in six languages and had a fair communication level in four others. He was also the owner of the elegant Royal Bar, which for many years attracted the most distinguished politicians, academics, and journalists of the country to important intellectual conversations. Bakit was Catholic and was registered as such in the records in Costa Rica, though he was given Syrian nationality. Zacarías Bakit died in Managua from an earthquake in 1931.¹⁴⁴ ‘Isa Ibrahim (Salvador Abraham) Hasbun Hasbun arrived in Costa Rica from El Salvador early in 1941.¹⁴⁵ In El Salvador, where he arrived in 1924, he devoted himself to commerce with a small store in San Miguel.¹⁴⁶ In El Salvador he met another Palestinian, Warde (Rosa) Hasbun Dabdoub, whom he married in 1932.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, after meeting Ricardo Saprissa, a businessman owner of a textile factory in Costa Rica, Salvador Hasbun moved to this other country in Central America, where he settled in Lepanto in the province of Puntarenas. He devoted himself to cotton production in order to provide raw material for the Saprissa textile factory,¹⁴⁸ but due to the unhealthy conditions of the region of Lepanto he contracted malaria. And so Salvador Hasbun left the region and cotton production and started his own cattle-raising business, which was unsuccessful.¹⁴⁹ He then moved to the province of Cartago, where he had a restaurant, and he later left Cartago with his family and settled in the province of Limón on the Caribbean coast. There he founded a sawmill, which he kept for many years.¹⁵⁰ It turned out to be a prosperous business.¹⁵¹ His cousin, ‘Isa (Salvador) Jorge Hasbun, arrived in Costa Rica from El Salvador, also in 1941.¹⁵² By that time he had already married Anisse ‘Isa Hasbun Nassar.¹⁵³ Salvador Jorge Hasbun performed different activities in Costa Rica. At first he started a textile factory in the province of Cartago, which was not a successful business,¹⁵⁴ so he had to close it down and moved to the province of Puntarenas, where he devoted himself to agriculture. Later, as did his cousin ‘Isa Ibrahim, he moved to the province of Guanacaste for cattle-raising. This was not a sound business either, and he decided to go back to Cartago to assist his cousin in the restaurant La Florida.¹⁵⁵ For the remainder of his life Salvador Jorge Hasbun devoted himself to the itinerant commerce of grains and other foods in the southern regions of the country. He carried produce from Cartago to San Isidro de El General and to other cities in that area.¹⁵⁶

There were, then, very few Costa Ricans of Palestinian origin who settled in this country during the first two periods of the Arab immigration to Latin America, with the exceptions of the descendants of Zacarías Bakit and those of Salvador Abraham Hasbun Hasbun.¹⁵⁷ Two daughters of Salvador Hasbun, Leyla Hasbun and Mayra Hasbun, are English professors. Leyla Hasbun has taught at the University of Costa Rica since 1980, while Mayra Hasbun has taught at the Universidad Hispanoamericana since 1989 and at the Universidad Latina since 1992.¹⁵⁸ The reasons for the scarcity of Palestinian immigrants in Costa Rica at a time when many of their countrymen settled in other Central American nations are unknown. Any explanation would be pure speculation. It is possible that Palestinians found better economic opportunities in the other countries of the area, which acted as an incentive for their settlement in those nations that offered the best possibilities. In 1904, Ascensión Esquivel, then President of the Republic, issued an executive decree (number 1 of 10 June 1904) prohibiting the entry to Costa Rica of Arabs, Turks, Syrians, Armenians, and Gypsies of any nationality, which was an impediment for many more Palestinians to arrive to Costa Rica.¹⁵⁹

In Costa Rica there are 32 households of Palestinian origin. There are 31 families and one single man from Palestine. The majority of them arrived after the Israeli occupation of the territories of Gaza and the West Bank in 1967, especially in the early 1970s, even though there were some sporadic cases before that year. Among these cases was Alberto Bakit from ‘Ayn Karim and cousin of Zacarías, who arrived in 1963. Alberto Bakit stayed in Costa Rica for a short period and very soon moved to Chile.¹⁶⁰ The majority of the most recent Palestinian immigrants in Costa Rica, mainly after the major wars of the Arab-Israeli conflict, are Muslims. Therefore, their political participation and economic success are beyond the scope of this essay. However, on the whole, most of the Palestinian immigrants and their descendants in Costa Rica are Christians of various denominations. This is shown in the following table:

Table No. 2

Religions of the Palestinians and Palestinian descendants in Costa Rica

Religions	Number	Percentage
Catholics	55	52.38
Muslims	24	22.86
Orthodox	20	19.05
Other Christian denominations	1	0.95
Not Declared	5	4.76
Total	105	100 %

Source: Information gathered by the author through interviews (1993-1996), (2009-2010)

From an economic point of view, the Palestinians have contributed to the progress of certain areas of the country, even though on a modest scale. An example is the case of the small farm for coffee and citrus production in Turrialba owned by Dr. ‘Abd al-Fattah Sa’sa’, a Muslim, or the

cattle farm owned by Nijmeh (Estrella) Mu'ammam in the area near San Carlos. The extension of this farm is 100 hectares (1 hectare is 2.47 acres) and today has over 100 heads of cattle.¹⁶¹ Others in their businesses have also generated jobs, as in the case of the jewellers Mauricio Sayegh, his brother Elías, and his nephew Raja Bakkar.¹⁶² Furthermore, one can mention the case of Hajj Hanna Frech who is the owner of a store for clothing, footwear, and house utensils in San José, which is administrated by his son 'Issa Frech.¹⁶³ Hanna Frech also owns another similar store in the border area between Costa Rica and Panama.¹⁶⁴

Oscar Bakit had, until his death in 1998, a very active business life with his Bakit de Centro America, an advertising company divided in three parts:

1. An accounting enterprise;
2. Telepress, for television news, similar to a news agency;
3. IDEAS (International Development of Enterprises of Advertising and Sales), the advertising enterprise, which actually designs and publishes ads in different newspapers and other media for different companies.¹⁶⁵

All these three professional businesses have generated 28 permanent new jobs and 10 temporary jobs. Michael Canavati (Qanawati) is a Palestinian industrialist in Costa Rica. He has the Lovable factory for women's underwear. This factory has generated 210 new jobs in Costa Rica.¹⁶⁶ The Lovable factory is also located in Honduras where it is one of the major industries for women's underwear. Its products are sold in all the countries of Central America.¹⁶⁷ Michael Canavati (Qanawati) is also the owner of Monty's, an entertainment center and tourist resort in San Joaquín de Flores, in the province of Heredia. This center has created 55 new jobs.¹⁶⁸ Yusuf Samara, a Muslim, added to the industrial activities with his Creaciones Yiris factory, especially for women's underwear. This factory has also generated employment in Costa Rica.¹⁶⁹ According to the information, Creaciones Yiris has created 45 new jobs in the country.¹⁷⁰

Some Palestinians, such as Michael Canavati and Norma Handal from Honduras and the various Hasbun families from El Salvador, have arrived in Costa Rica from other countries of Central America. Some others were Muslims, such as 'Abd al-Karim Tahir, who arrived from Panama,¹⁷¹ Kamal Rishmawi, who arrived from Honduras, and Yusuf and Halima Samara, from Nicaragua. Several factors have contributed to this more local immigration. Among them are marriage, as in the case of Nijmeh (Estrella) Mu'ammam who married to a Costa Rican, or the political difficulties and internal conflict in some of the other countries of Central America that caused some Palestinians to move to Costa Rica in search of better conditions and peace.¹⁷² Related to the issue of marriage, it is necessary to explain that from the first two Palestinian immigrants in Costa Rica, Zakariyya Bakit and 'Isa Ibrahim Hasbun, only one of them, the latter, married a Palestinian woman. This is the first example of endogamy among Palestinians in Costa Rica. However, since they met and married in El Salvador before moving to Costa Rica, this process can also be understood as a case of a Palestinian

family moving to Costa Rica. Bakit married a Costa Rican woman, therefore initiating the blood mixture. Both descendant families, Bakit and Hasbun, in the second and third generations, married Costa Ricans. This was mainly due to the fact that there were very few Palestinian descendants in Costa Rica, and they did not keep the tradition to look for distant (or close) cousins for possible marriages arranged by their respective families, as it has been preserved, although with some limitations, among Palestinian descendants in Honduras and Nicaragua, for example.¹⁷³

The majority of the Palestinian immigrants of Christian origin who arrived in Costa Rica during the seventies and afterwards constitute mixed marriages, either with Costa Ricans or other Central Americans. Among them are the cases of Elías Raja, married to a Costa Rican; Michael Qanawati, married to a Honduran woman; and José Jorge Marcos Frech, married (later divorced) a Nicaraguan woman. However, some Palestinian immigrants are married to other Palestinians, like the case of Hajj Hanna Frech who is married to a Palestinian woman. Raja Sayegh is also married to a Palestinian woman. These are the examples of endogamy. On the other hand, there are other examples of Arab endogamy, although not absolutely Palestinian, like the cases of Dr. Norma Handal, a Palestinian immigrant from Bethlehem to Honduras, and later to Costa Rica, who is married to a Costa Rican of Lebanese origin. Other examples of Arab endogamy are the cases of Mauricio Sayegh, who is married to a Lebanese woman, and 'Issa Frech, a second generation of Palestinian origin, who arrived in Costa Rica from Nicaragua, and is married to a Jordanian woman.

In the political and diplomatic spheres, some Palestinian descendants have distinguished themselves in the Costa Rican foreign service. Dr. Jorge Hasbun has occupied diplomatic positions abroad. He was first Counsellor of the Embassy of Costa Rica in Argentina from 1990 to 1992 and was then appointed Ambassador of Costa Rica to Romania from 1993 to 1994.¹⁷⁴

The second and third generations of Palestinian immigrants are completely assimilated with the Costa Rican culture and values, as this process has occurred with other Arab immigrants in Costa Rica, in the other countries of Central America, and in many other nations in the world. The loss of the Arabic language as the main vehicle for communication and the preservation of cultural ties from one generation to the other could have contributed as one of the major reasons for the whole process. Undoubtedly, the second and third generations of Palestinian immigrants are mainly the result of the blending, through wedding links, of Palestinians with Costa Ricans. Many of the Palestinian descendants have studied in Costa Rica and have become professionals in different fields. For example, Doreen Bakit studied Painting in the Fine Arts Department of the University of Costa Rica. Her brother, Christian Bakit, graduated in Advertising and today works in his profession.¹⁷⁵ Norma Handal is also a professional and works as a psychiatrist. The cases of the Hasbun sisters, already mentioned, as teachers of English is also relevant, as well as the cases of Gerardo Solorzano Bakit, who studied Business Administration in the Universidad Latina, and Alberto Solorzano Bakit, who studied Veterinary Science at the Universidad Nacional in Heredia, Costa Rica.¹⁷⁶

These are just a few examples of the professional developments of Palestinian immigrants and their descendants in Costa Rica.¹⁷⁷ Through education as well as through the Christian religion, since the majority of the Costa Rican population practice Catholicism, descendants of Palestinian immigrants have accomplished a complete integration into Costa Rican society. The same tendency of assimilation into the national culture of the host country and total loss of the Arabic language can be seen, with few exceptions, from the second and third generations of Palestinian immigrants in Costa Rica and also in other countries in Central America.¹⁷⁸

The Case of the Palestinians of Christian Origin in Guatemala

Palestinians arriving in Guatemala since the late nineteenth century and especially in the early twentieth century coincided with the arrival of many of their countrymen in other nations in Central America. They entered in small numbers and did not maintain a group unity or a strong cultural identity,¹⁷⁹ as has been possible to determine for the Palestinian immigrants in Honduras or Nicaragua, or for those of more recent arrival in Costa Rica. These few Palestinians in Guatemala have accomplished economic success, mainly in commerce and the textile industry. In the case of commerce, the Abularach family, the first one of Palestinian origin and Christian faith to arrive to Guatemala, was successful in business from the very beginning. This family concentrated especially in the import-export business.¹⁸⁰ As early as 1914, Garza Abularach requested a tax exemption to import 50 looms, 25 other machines, and a steam-operated kettlemaker for a clothing factory, proof of his family's fast growing economic prosperity.¹⁸¹

The Safie family has also been successful in different businesses in Guatemala, as well as in the textile industry. The Safie still owns one of the major clothing factories in Central America, called La Estrella. This family has been successful as merchants as well. The Zibara family was also devoted to commerce since their early arrival to Guatemala. They had their major shops in the Portal del Señor, an important commercial area in Guatemala City, where today the Palacio Nacional is located. The descendants of the first Zibara members who settled in Guatemala are also devoted to the textile industry. The Zibara, as well as the Abularach and the Dacaret families, also owned warehouses and participated in local and administrative politics. Education was a means to excel for these families. Some of them have become members of the professional class since the early 1940s. Undoubtedly, education has contributed to their rapid integration and assimilation into the Guatemalan society. They frequently married Guatemalan women, mainly due to the limited presence of Palestinians in the country.¹⁸²

Palestinian descendants in Guatemala have distinguished themselves in various cultural and artistic fields, like the case of the renowned painter Rodolfo Abularach. In politics, one has to men-

tion the case of Emilio Saca Dabdoub, a member of the right wing Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN), who was elected as a congressman for the period 1996-2000, during the presidency of Alvaro Arzú Irigoyen. The president of Guatemala even appointed him as his Private Secretary of the Presidency. Nowadays Palestinian descendants in Guatemala do not speak Arabic; they consider themselves Guatemalans and are totally assimilated into the culture of this host country. This does not mean that they did not support or talk in favor of the PLO in the past, or more recently in favor of the Palestinian National Authority and the possible creation of a Palestinian State. However, they have been very careful and they never published an article or went into the television news to express an idea as a group, but rather as individuals. As a community, and because they live in Guatemala, they assert that their presence, as well as the presence of Jews in the country, should not parallel the Arab-Israeli conflict. Palestinians reject having any kind of problems with other Guatemalans, including Jews. This attitude has avoided breaking out hostilities between the two communities.

Conclusion

After the case studies analyzed in this essay, it is possible to conclude that there are specificities and particularities for each group of Palestinian immigrants in the five Central American republics. There are also special characteristics for each particular period of immigration. In this diverse environment, one can observe general patterns as explained in this essay. The first Palestinian immigrants in Central America arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The largest number of Palestinian immigrants went to Honduras. These Palestinian immigrants were mainly of rural origin and were Christians. They went to Central America in search of better economic conditions and religious and political freedom. Syrians arrived under similar conditions as the Palestinians. Most of the Palestinians, but also some other Arab immigrants in Central America, mainly the Lebanese, devoted themselves to commerce, first itinerant and later in urban stores. Some Palestinian immigrants of Christian origin in Central America, as was demonstrated by the examples of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, became involved in industrial activities, mainly textiles. In some countries of Central America, like Costa Rica and Nicaragua, Palestinian industrial activities have been on a modest scale, since commerce has always been their main activity. The economic success of the Palestinian immigrants allowed them not only to quickly ascend the social ladder in these host Central American nations, but also to send money to Palestine to help their families or to pay for the entire trip expenses to bring over relatives and friends. These financial contributions also improved the economic condition of the towns and villages they left behind in Palestine. This was reported by various Ottoman administrative authorities and also by some European consular representatives.¹⁸³

Palestinian descendants of Christian origin in Central America from the first period of immigration are found completely integrated in the countries that admitted their ancestors. Some of

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