

## **Sisters and Brothers in the Diaspora: Palestinian Christians in Latin America**

**Viola Raheb**

### *Why Latin and Central America*

Palestinian immigration to Latin and Central America is considered one of the earliest in the modern history of the Palestinian people. Already in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century, Palestinians started to immigrate to Latin America. The Palestinian immigration to Latin America is seen as being composed of three waves: the first under the Ottoman Empire (1860-1916), the second under the British Mandate (1918-1948), and the third after the Nakba (1948). At the same time, it is important to note that during the second Intifada and between the years 2000-2005 another wave of Palestinian Christian immigration to Latin America took place, though not major in its number. The majority of the immigrants from the first wave were identified by the travel documents they were carrying and were considered, and are still to some extent, as Turks or as Syrians. According to the various researches done, the percentage of Christians among the total Palestinian immigrants to Latin America is being estimated at almost 80-85%. Due to the complexity of registration at the time of arrival, it is very difficult to have accurate numbers of Palestinian descendants in Latin America. Nevertheless, some scholars estimate the number at around half a million; the highest number of Palestinian immigrants being in Chile, while the highest percentage is considered to be in Honduras, where Palestinians make up almost 3% of the population. Today, Latin America has the biggest Palestinian Diaspora community outside the Arab World. At the same time, and taking into consideration the fact that the majority of this Diaspora community is of Christian Palestinian background, it also stands for the biggest Christian Palestinian community in the world, even in comparison to the original homeland.

The various studies show that these immigrants were able to develop a very solid economic ground and were able to become a major player within the economic sector of their new country of residence. At the same time, many of the second and third generation of these immigrants were able to develop influence within the media and the political arena. Nevertheless, the knowledge about these communities is very little even among Christian Palestinians themselves, and, accordingly, networking and exchange are weak. This study comes to shed some light on the Palestinian Christian Diaspora in Latin America and is a first effort in trying to map the biggest Christian Palestinian community in the Diaspora.<sup>1</sup>

## *Latin and South America, a Source of Hope for Palestine*

The political and economic developments in Latin America at the beginning of the twenty-first century and the rise of its role in regional and global politics have drawn a lot of international attention. Recently, Latin America has become a major source of hope for Palestinians. The ongoing wave of political developments in Latin America in connection with the Palestinian question has led to the recognition of an independent Palestinian state by many Latin and South American countries. Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, Guyana, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Suriname all recognized an independent Palestinian state between December 2010 and February 2011. Yet, several Latin American countries, including Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, had already either made a symbolic recognition of the Palestinian state or recognized a Palestinian state prior to this wave. The stand of Latin American countries at the UN General Assembly in relation to the Palestinian bid for statehood, and its vote in the UNESCO for a full membership of Palestine in the UN agency brought this recognition into a new political level. The political stand of these Latin American countries is fostering the hope among the Palestinian political leadership and the Palestinians in general. Yet, in spite of this political euphoria, especially among the Palestinians, the presence of the Palestinian Diaspora community in Latin America and their possible role in contributing to these developments is almost absent from the discussion. Is there a role this community is playing? What possible role could it play in terms of relating to Palestine and the political developments? In recent years more importance has been given to studying the role of Diaspora communities in peace efforts and peace initiatives. In March 2011, the United Nations Meeting of Civil Society in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace met in Montevideo, Uruguay, under the theme “Engaging civil society in Latin America and the Caribbean for peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.” The conference also addressed the possible role of the Palestinian and Jewish communities in Latin America in regard to fostering peace endeavors, as they have a long history of coexistence in Latin America.

### *Multiple Identities*

In the course of preparing for this book, I had to contact several individuals and organizations in Latin and Central America, which was a challenging experience beyond the issue of language borders. One of the fascinating experiences was the reaction of persons with an Arab or a Palestinian background. Almost all of them were people of the fourth or fifth generation of immigrants to Latin and Central America. All of them, without any exception, referred to their Arab or Palestinian roots. This reference varied from one to another. While some said that they do not know exactly where their family came from (they assumed the origin to be Palestine, Syria, or Lebanon),

others could name the exact place (country and town) of origin of their families. There were also some who introduced themselves as Christian Palestinians from Chile, Mexico or whatever Latin American country they were citizens of.

Almost all of them have never been to Palestine or to any other Arab country, and they do not speak or understand the Arabic language. While understanding themselves as Latinos, they feel at the same time the Arab and Palestinian roots that are a part of their identity. Roberto Marin Guzman writes in his paper, “In Central America, the second, the third, and in certain cases even the fourth generation of Palestinian descendants have lost the Arabic language. They still have a clear desire to defend the Palestinian people and to rescue the Arab cultural values and traditions.”<sup>2</sup> Nicole Saffie Guevara and Lorenzo Agar Corbinos write: “Although the descendants consider themselves Chileans, the first, second, third, and even fourth generations born in the country somehow still identify themselves as Arabs.”<sup>3</sup> Prof. Monzar Frohoor also addresses this point: “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.”<sup>4</sup> These observations among generations of Palestinian descendants could be seen as indicators of a rather positive identity formation process that recognizes the differences between the cultural traditions of their forefathers and foremothers and that of their new homeland and such allows multiple identities to exist. It is this multiple identity that is challenging the assumption that due to being assimilated in their communities, descendants of Palestinians in Latin America choose not to identify themselves as Palestinians.

### *Christian Palestinians in Publications*

In the recent decades, the scholar interest in addressing the Arab immigrant communities and their history in Latin and South America has increased immensely. Many books and researches<sup>5</sup> have been written on the Arab immigrants in general while others addressed particularly the Palestinian immigration to Latin and South America. Some universities<sup>6</sup> have even developed new research projects that are addressing the issue of Middle Eastern immigration to Latin America. However, looking at the studies and publications shows that Palestinian Christians played only a marginal role in the content of the studies. The religious affiliation of the Palestinian immigrants is not at the heart of the research, rather it comes as statistical background when describing the Palestinian community in this region. Only very few addressed the Christian Palestinian community as such. Among them are the studies of Prof. Nancie L. Gonzalez (“The Christian Palestinians of Honduras: An Uneasy Accommodation”),<sup>7</sup> Olivier Prud’homme (“Los Cristianos de la region de Euphrata (Palestina) y sus practicas comerciales en el Salvador entre 1886 y 1918”),<sup>8</sup> and the MA thesis of Rosa Araya Suazo from Chile (“La iglesia ortodoxa en Chile. patriarcado de antioquia y todo el oriente”).<sup>9</sup> One could think that the religious affiliation of the migrant communities is not

a point of interest for scholars, which is definitely not accurate since many studies do address this point specifically. Various studies have been made on the Muslim<sup>10</sup> and Jewish<sup>11</sup> communities. At the same time, there is more and more scholarly interest in addressing the factor of religion in identity formation with regard to migration and diaspora. To what extent does the migration process change religious traditions and practices? How does religion influence the process of migration and social integration for assimilation?<sup>12</sup>

### *The role of Religion within the Palestinian Diaspora in Latin America*

The issue of religion and religious affiliation played a role in the immigration of people from the Ottoman state to the Americas already at its outset. Entering into the new country brought a religious mobility with it. In his work on Ottoman emigration to America, 1860-1914, Kemal Karpat writes that even Muslim immigrants from the Ottoman state chose to enter as “Syrians” or “Christians” in order to not jeopardize their entry. “Many took on Christian names, and it is certain that a large number actually converted to Christianity (or their children did).”<sup>13</sup>

While the aspects of ethnicity and culture have been discussed in addressing the Palestinian Diaspora in Latin America, the aspect of religion has been almost absent in addressing the role of religion in the experience of the Christian Palestinian Diaspora in Latin America. What role did religion take in the self-understanding of the Palestinian Diaspora community in Latin America? Was it just one component of their identity, or did it play a significant role in developing their new diasporic identity? How did their Christian religious identity develop in the new country? How did the religious mobility influence their identity?

Looking historically at the denominational character of the Palestinian Christians, who emigrated from Palestine in the nineteenth century, shows that they were of various Christian religious affiliations. The fact that the majority of the Christian Palestinian immigrants belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church is a reflection of the denominational affiliation within Palestine itself, where the Greek Orthodox Church is the biggest among the local Churches.

There have been changes within this Christian religious affiliation of Palestinian Christian immigrants to Latin America due to various reasons. There has been mobility within the affiliation to the Eastern Orthodox Church itself. The majority of the Palestinian Christian Orthodox in Latin America today belongs to the Orthodox Church of Antioch, which is not the same as the Orthodox Church in Palestine, namely the Greek Orthodox. Researching the web of the Orthodox Church in Chile<sup>14</sup> shows that already as early as 1916 priests of Palestinian origin were ordained to serve the local Christian Palestinian Orthodox community. Among the names listed in their chronology of

priests serving the Orthodox Church are the names of Father Juri Solomon, Father Nicholas Touma, and Father Constantin Ziade, all three originally from Beit Jala. At the same time, there is mobility among Palestinian Christian Orthodox descendants toward the Russian Orthodox Church in Latin America.

The records show that there is also a religious mobility toward the Roman Catholic Church, either as a sign of adaption to the new context or as a result of the intermarriage between descendants of Palestinian Christians with the local community. This mobility toward the Roman Catholic Church is clearly seen in terms of comparing the religious affiliation of the various generations, as stated by Nicole Saffie Guevara and Lorenzo Agar Corbinos.<sup>15</sup> Some Palestinian Christians also got married to members of the indigenous communities within the new countries and, accordingly, came in contact with indigenous religions.

At the same time, there is also mobility toward other Christian religious denominations within the new countries, such as the Evangelical Churches. Some Evangelical Churches, like the Baptist Church, developed new ministries especially for Arabs. The Arabic Evangelical Church of São Paulo, Brazil, for example, was established as early as 1954.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that this religious mobility of Palestinian Christians varied from one host country to the other, as did the religious constellation of the communities from one country to the other.

At the same time, the role of other Arab Christian communities in the formation of the new religious affiliation among Palestinian Christians has also played an important role. For instance, Syrian and Lebanese Christian communities within the new countries served as social and religious networks for Palestinian Christians in Latin America. This also had an impact on the religious mobility.

Some descendants of Christian Palestinians describe a kind of hybridization in terms of their religious belonging. Their religious identity today includes elements of various traditions both from the religious traditions of their ancestors as well as from the new acquired religious traditions. In his paper, Roberto Marin Guzman comments on this issue: “The ornaments of wooden saints and icons, following the traditional forms of Middle Eastern Orthodox Christians, are combined with some Mayan Indian decorations.”<sup>16</sup>

In some of the researches<sup>17</sup> on the Palestinian Diaspora in Latin America, scholars underline the integration, some even the assimilation, of Palestinian Christians within the new country. For some, the religious affiliation is a positive contributing factor for their successful integration and assimilation. This observation seems to be very appealing when looked at from current perspective.

However, reading the papers in this book show also the difficulties and hardships encountered by the first immigrants.

*Christian Palestinians in Palestine and  
the Palestinian Christians Diaspora in Latin America*

The study “Palestinian Christians: Facts, Figures and Trends - 2008” estimates the number of Palestinian Christians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem at 51,710, which makes 1.37 percent of the Palestinian population.<sup>18</sup> The majority of Palestinian Christians live today outside of Palestine. This ongoing immigration of Palestinian Christians has very much influenced both the Churches and the society. In the book “Christian Presence in the Holy Land,” Fu’ad Farah states that the effect of this immigration varied from one Church to another. According to his data, the Armenian Orthodox Church was the one to suffer most from immigration, having lost almost 61 percent of its members, followed by the Assyrian Orthodox Church with almost 50 percent, the Arab Greek Orthodox Church with 32 percent, the Roman Catholic Church with 28 percent, the Greek Catholic with 15 percent, and the Protestant Churches with 8 percent.<sup>19</sup>

Family networks in the Diaspora have functioned as a generator for new migration among family members, a phenomena that can also be traced through researching the family names of Palestinian immigrants to Latin America, as Roberto Marín-Guzmán has shown.<sup>20</sup> Today many of these family names are no longer present in Palestine and can only be found in the Diaspora, as stated in the work of Dr. Musallam.

The future of the Christian Palestinian community is very much related to the issue of connecting to our faithful living in the Diaspora. Developing a sense of community and solidarity with our sisters and brothers who at a certain stage had to leave our homeland is essential for strengthening our understanding of who we are and who we want to be. Efforts are needed from the local churches and their CROs to link between all Palestinian Christians, those who still live in Palestine and those who are in the Diaspora.

It is our hope that this book is a first step for the dwindling Christian Palestinian community in Palestine to rediscover and reconnect with their sisters and brothers in the Diaspora.

**The Formative Stages of Palestinian Arab Immigration  
to Latin America and Immigrants’ Quest  
for Return and for Palestinian Citizenship  
in the Early 1920’s**

*Adnan A. Musallam*

*Early Immigration from the Ottoman State to the Americas*

The Mediterranean region witnessed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century waves of emigration from the Ottoman State. Nevertheless, emigration to the Americas was an inseparable part of international migration of human waves, which started between 1880 and 1920 from South and Central Europe and from the Ottoman Empire to the United States. Their number was estimated at 25,000,000: Italians, Greeks, Slavs, Jews, Ottomans, and others. The number of Arab Ottomans from Greater Syria (now Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Jordan) in this immigration was estimated to be 250,000 persons, not to mention the thousands of emigrants who ventured to Latin America.<sup>21</sup>

According to a report by the Ottoman Consul in the City of Buenos Aires in Argentina, 46,000 Ottoman immigrants arrived between 1911 and 1913. The Consul urged his government to put an end to this phenomenon.<sup>22</sup> The number of Ottoman immigrants to the Americas between 1860 and 1914 was estimated at 1,200,000 including 33,000 who came from Syria.<sup>23</sup>

The major factors that attracted immigrants to the Americas were economic. The tremendous industrialization which was taking place in the United States required manpower; this was guaranteed by the large number of immigrants. High wages and rumors that the American government was distributing agricultural land free of charge to anyone who migrated to the western parts of the United States (Homestead Act 1862) gave immigrants additional incentives.<sup>24</sup>

The Ottoman Foreign Ministry, furthermore, received many applications submitted by Brazilian landowner Paolo Duval from Sao Paulo asking for large numbers of Ottoman agricultural workers.<sup>25</sup> News about fortunes made by pioneers of emigration and checks sent to the mother country motivated others to follow suit. In 1914, emigrants from geographical Syria sent home remittances estimated at 8,000,000 dollars.<sup>26</sup>