

Representing Opportunities

The Palestinian Diaspora in Latin America



By Claudia Rivera Eltit

The Palestinian diaspora has a special place in Latin America, as in each country of this vast continent a history of effort, adaptation, integration, and in many cases success has been, and still is being, written by the people of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese descent. The Palestinian diaspora was formed by a great migration that, beginning over a hundred years ago, has caused people from the Middle East to settle in South America. Today, this diaspora stands enriched, conscious, and in many cases with the need to reconnect to its roots.

To be fair, the influence of Arab culture on Latin America began long before the so-called diaspora. During the time called Al-Andalus, Arabs lived in the Iberian Peninsula for eight centuries and left an enormous impact on Spanish society and its language, economy, gastronomy and architecture, features that were transplanted to the New World in the course of colonization. Starting in the twentieth century, the first migratory waves of Palestinians settled in places scattered throughout Latin America, having left in a somewhat compulsory fashion. Initially, they left for socio-economic reasons or to flee from the harsh rule of the Ottoman Empire that started sending young Palestinians to the battlefield during World War I. Later on, they left to evade oppression under the British Mandate. The most massive Palestinian immigration occurred during the nineteen-fifties and -sixties in the aftermath of the creation of Israel and the ensuing suppression of Palestinian economic enterprise and political and social freedom. Moreover, and not only due to the economic hardship of the last decades, the American continent has continued to receive new Palestinian immigrants until today.

The first emigrants left on boats en route to Europe and eventually disembarked at remote ports of Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Panama in a new world that promised a universe of opportunities. These migrants gradually adapted to their new surroundings, and sooner or later, their native Arabic language was no longer taught to succeeding generations. They embraced the Catholic religion, predominant in most Latin American countries, and dedicated themselves to commerce and the production of textiles, frequently gaining wealth and status in their communities. Some claim that the elites of the host countries did not look favorably on the economic achievements of these newcomers, but the truth is that they stimulated the microeconomics of many localities and left a special impact in rural areas that in some cases had until then not experienced monetary economy. The prosperity the migrants gained in the host countries and the support networks they developed attracted new waves of migration, which is why we find in Latin America large concentrations of people from the same Palestinian cities and even families.



Espir Gazale, born 1899, left Palestine for Chile in 1912; depicted here with his first wife Florentina Ortiz and his oldest son Alexander. Photo by his granddaughter, Yasna Gazale.

Chilean organizations such as Invest Palestine, the Palestinian Federation, and Fundación Palestina Belén 2000 are clear examples of the Palestinian diaspora's deep desire to stay connected and involved with the homeland. It is extremely important to recognize the tremendous opportunity this diaspora offers in terms of initiatives that may revitalize the economy of both countries, encourage tourism to and in Palestine, and raise awareness of the population and its potential in some cases - and plight in others.

The descendants of those early immigrants frequently continued to engage in commerce, and during the nineteen-twenties and -thirties, a number of them expanded their business into wholesale trade, import, and manufacturing. In some countries these descendants of Palestinian immigrants established the first banks and chambers of commerce. By the beginning of the nineteen-sixties, they had penetrated into other areas, such as hotels in Central America, and accessed university studies. Besides economic development, social integration began to flourish considerably and constantly. Initial rejection expressed by the local population towards the so-called "Turks" had caused Palestinians to found their own clubs and associations that in the beginning functioned as areas of protection and reception but with the passage of time and due to the economic success of this community became social spaces of integration with local communities. They moved on to establish hospitals, charitable

associations, and renowned sports clubs such as the well-known and successful "Palestino" soccer club in Chile.

Given this background, it is interesting to investigate how much Palestinian culture has survived the process of adaptation to distance and the passing of time. Moreover, it is fascinating to see that today, the new generations are showing a great interest in renewing ties with Palestine and its people. Have such links existed uninterruptedly, or have they been rediscovered recently as part of a search for identity and claim of Palestinian heritage? In my opinion, there is a bit of both. The coming and going of people and the transmission of their experiences and stories have maintained cultural and family ties. In recent times, we have seen the ties between Palestine and the diaspora invigorated by a growing desire to build an identity, and this phenomenon has resulted in political affirmation that reaches beyond national and religious borders.



The passport of Nicola Abutridy, great-grandfather of the author, who came to Chile when he was 18 years old and settled in the rural town Nogales. Photo by the author.



A clear example can be seen in Chile, the country with the largest Palestinian population outside the Arab world, as Chilean Palestinians are estimated to amount to over 350,000 people. They are well integrated into society and encompass important businesspersons in diverse goods, politicians, activists, intellectuals, artists, and athletes. As of recently, Chile has been witnessing the birth of new pro-Palestinian initiatives every year, and the real dimensions of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict receives more and more coverage in the media.

The increasing desire to develop a post-materialistic identity that began during the late 1990s, combined with the rise of social networks and communication platforms, has encouraged the Palestinian diaspora in Latin America to evaluate the most effective mechanisms by which they could contribute to their country of origin and help solve social problems in Palestine. A number of

calls have addressed international Palestinian communities, asking them to express their interest in and solidarity with their homeland. One of the most fruitful initiatives has been the invitation to invest into Palestine and its young entrepreneurs. Despite the difficult situation, Palestine has many young talents who possess undeniable professional capacities and, overcoming adversity, have managed to build successful projects.

Furthermore, various organizations and businesspeople located in Europe and Latin America have recognized the opportunities that the Palestinian market offers and have connected profitable business ideas with real investment. A strong indication of such realization is the fact that in the year 2015, for example, slightly more than half of the foreign investment into the Palestinian economy took place in the form of foreign direct investment.

Even though good business practices must still be improved and current legislation strengthened, there are many companies in Palestine that generate profits amounting to close to double the amounts that had been predicted, even though they have been in the market for only two to three years. And the tendency to invest is growing every day.

Thousands demonstrated in Santiago, Chile, to protest against the Israeli military offensive in Gaza, 2014. Photo taken by the author.

Over time, it has become well known that immediate help is not sufficient to produce a sustainable development in Palestine, and investment is being recognized as a form of support that creates an opportunity for Palestinian entrepreneurs to produce locally, increase stable employment, and ultimately develop and extend a network of companies and factories that will help raise the Palestinian economy gradually and increase self-sufficiency. At this time, such foreign investment is mainly focused on the areas of banking, tourism, mutual funds, and IT. But we are optimistic and certain that investment opportunities will soon extend to other areas as well. And with such enterprises, the real possibility of building our own state will begin to materialize.

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