

# Assimilation or Cultural Difference? Palestinian Immigrants in Honduras\*

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## ABSTRACT

This article looks at Palestinian immigrants in contemporary Honduras. It questions the general assumption that Palestinians have successfully assimilated into predominantly mestizo societies. It shows that the Palestinian community has maintained various features and references, such as their religious affiliation and their activity in commerce and trade, that make them a culturally differentiated group. This article also explores why, against the recent backdrop of multiculturalism, the Palestinian immigrant community have not mobilized an ethnic identity in order to gain access to resources or demand collective recognition. Furthermore, it shows that Palestinian immigrants have benefitted from various macro and local political and economic factors and policies that contributed to the accumulation of different forms of capital throughout the 20th century.

## KEY WORDS

Palestinian immigration, social mobility of immigrants, Honduras.

## ¿Asimilados o comunidad diferenciada? Los migrantes palestinos en Honduras

### RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda la migración palestina en Honduras. Cuestiona la noción aceptada de que los palestinos son un grupo asimilado mostrando que, a lo largo del siglo XX, la comunidad palestina sostiene varias referencias —por ejemplo, la afiliación religiosa y la actividad en el comercio— que la identifican como una comunidad culturalmente diferenciada. Asimismo, este artículo discute por qué la comunidad palestina no moviliza una identidad étnica para poder tener más acceso a recursos o exigir derechos colectivos. Esto se debe a varios factores político-económicos globales y locales que permitieron no sólo que los palestinos tuviesen acceso a varios recursos, sino también que acumularan suficientes formas de capital y movilidad social en la sociedad hondureña.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Migración palestina, movilidad social de migrantes, Honduras.

## Assimilados ou comunidade diferenciada? Os migrantes palestinos em Honduras

### RESUMO

Este artigo trata da migração palestina em Honduras. Questiona-se a noção aceita de que os palestinos são um grupo assimilado, o que mostra que, ao longo do século xx, a comunidade palestina sustenta várias referências —por exemplo, a afiliação religiosa e a atividade no comércio— que os identificam como comunidade culturalmente diferenciada. Além disso, neste artigo, discute-se por que a comunidade palestina não mobiliza uma identidade étnica para poder ter mais acesso a recursos ou exigir direitos coletivos. Isso se deve a vários fatores político-econômicos no âmbito global e local que permitiram que os palestinos não só tivessem acesso a vários recursos, mas também que acumulassem suficientes formas de capital e mobilidade social na sociedade hondurenha.

### PALAVRAS CHAVE

Migração palestina, mobilidade social de migrantes, Honduras.

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## Introduction

In various newspaper reports from July to August 2011, Porfirio Lobo, the president of Honduras, publicly manifested his support for the creation of a Palestinian state. He claimed that, “every *pueblo* is entitled to have their own identity and territory.” Furthermore, Honduras had a great number of people of Palestinian descent (*La Tribuna* 2011a). These comments were not welcomed by the Israeli ambassador in Honduras, who considered them a betrayal of the Israeli state (*El Herald* 2011). Many Hondurans also unleashed their anger through xenophobic remarks in online forums: “P[orfirio] Lobo is obeying the Palestinian oligarchy” (*La Tribuna* 2011c), “Now we can confirm the fact that the *turcos* control Honduras” (*La Tribuna* 2011b). This is not the first time Hondurans have manifested their dislike towards the Palestinian community. Similar xenophobic reactions surfaced in the aftermath of the 2009 coup when many “*Turcos* get out!” graffiti appeared.

The events show that, far from being an assimilated group, Palestinian immigrants and their descendants are still perceived as a culturally distinct group in Honduras (as in other parts of Central America). Interestingly, and contrary to the case of the Syrian-Lebanese communities in Brazil and Mexico (Karam 2007; Alfaro-Velcamp 2007), the Palestinian community does not mobilize an ethnic identity for collective rights even against the backdrop of multiculturalism in Honduras since 1992. Why not? Some studies point out that multicultural reforms focus mostly on the collective rights of indigenous communities and those of African descent (Hooker 2005; Mollett 2006), whereas Palestinians and other Middle Eastern and Asian immigrants, such as the Syrian-Lebanese, Jews and Chinese, are not racialized like the indigenous, black, white or European populations. Instead, they are perceived to be undesirable immigrants (Hu-DeHart 2009). González (1992) states that Palestinian cross-border ties with their homeland make them transnational citizens who have nonetheless successfully assimilated into Latin America’s mainstream mestizo society. Nevertheless, various other studies disagree with this argument. Foroohar (2011) observes a double identity among Palestinian immigrants and their descendants—relating to both the host and the home society—while Pastor (2009) and Amaya (1997) point out that an “Arab” identity which emerged in the early 20th century is still present. Euraque (2006 y 2009) argues that cultural difference keeps politicians and elite members of Palestin-

ian descent in Central America from overcoming the racial-ethnic national political systems, which are strongly anchored in a mestizo heritage.

These studies suggest that Palestinian immigrants and their descendants are a culturally distinct group in predominantly mestizo societies, rather than an assimilated minority. However, scholars have not yet addressed what culturally distinguishes the Palestinian immigrant community nor do they discuss why Palestinians have not mobilized an ethnic identity for collective rights or cultural recognition in the public sphere in order to fight discrimination, gain access to resources (e.g. land) or increase political representation. The article discusses the ‘absence’ of a Palestinian identity in the public sphere in Central America as well as the perception of Palestinians as a culturally distinct group against the backdrop of multiculturalism. Focusing on the Palestinian community in Honduras and based on accounts in newspapers, magazines and conversations with scholars and members of the Palestinian community in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, as well as secondary sources, it also shows how, unlike indigenous groups and those of African descent, Palestinians have not needed to publicly mobilize an ethnic identity in order to obtain collective rights or cultural recognition.

This is because of their social mobility, due mainly to their accumulation of different forms of capital throughout the 20th century. The fact that the Palestinian community has been able to gain access to economic and political resources without mobilizing a ‘Middle Eastern,’ ‘Arab’ or ‘Palestinian’ identity does not mean that such a thing does not exist. Being “Palestinian” in Honduras is linked to the sharing of certain practices among the community, such as eating specific foods, maintaining ties with the home society (through travel or the use of new technologies, e.g., cable TV, Internet), being Orthodox Christian, and working in commerce and trade.

The article is organized in three parts: the next part discusses Palestinian social mobility in the 20th century, paying special attention to the accumulation of different forms of capital which enabled Palestinians to achieve a privileged economic position and, later, political power in Honduras; the second part discusses the emergence of an “Arab” identity in the first half of the 20th century and its transformation, focusing on the features and references that culturally distinguish the Palestinian community in Honduras, particularly

the fact of being Orthodox Christian and working in commerce and trade; the last section offers conclusions regarding future research on Palestinian immigration and social mobility, particularly on how a decolonial perspective can contribute to reinterpreting the economic and social history of Central America and the Caribbean.

### Palestinian Social Mobility in the 20th Century: The Emergence of an Economic Elite

Palestinians first arrived in Honduras in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Today, after more than 100 years of immigration, the Palestinian community is not only known for being successful merchants and entrepreneurs, but many are also part of the economic and political elite. A study carried out in the early 1990s confirms this. As Table 1 shows, 23 families and transnational companies then controlled Honduran resources and production systems through their businesses. Ten of these families were Palestinian immigrants or their descendants. The number of these predominant families, including those of Palestinian descent, has increased in the past two decades.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, one individual of Palestinian descent has already been elected president, and other Palestinian entrepreneurs have become actively involved in politics.<sup>2</sup>

For many Hondurans, Palestinians are successful, rich, and powerful. When I was doing bibliographical research in the library of the Department of Economics at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, UNAH (National University of Honduras) in Tegucigalpa, I spoke with another researcher about Palestinian entrepreneurs:

“You want to know what type of business the *turcos*<sup>3</sup> run? Look! (pointing to an orange juice bottle on his desk) This orange juice was produced by Químicas Dinant, which belongs to the Facussé family. This shirt (indicating his own shirt) was made in one of Canahuati’s *maquilas*. The energy in this office is supplied by the Nasser family. Many Hondurans have bank accounts at Ficohsa, the second biggest bank in Honduras. Guess who owns it? The Atala family. As you can see, they’re everywhere, absolutely everywhere.” (Conversation with researcher at the UNAH, pers. comm.)

This perception of Palestinians as super-rich also appears in the *Artistas en Resistencia* (Artists in Resistance) blog which published a poem entitled “*Todo, todo es de Miguel Facussé*” (Everything, everything belongs to Miguel Facussé) in protest against the 2009 coup. The poem criticizes Palestinian control over everything, as symbolized by Miguel Facussé, the richest and most influential entrepreneur in Honduras, who is of Palestinian descent:

**Table 1.** The Honduran Elite in the Early Nineties (\* Families of Palestinian descent)

1. Sogerin	9. Bendeck Investments*	17. Maduro Investments
2. Facussé Investments*	10. Fasquelle Investments	18. Grupo Hasbun *
3. Continental Investments	11. Kafati Investments S.A. *	19. Flores Rodil Investments
4. Bancatlán S.A.	12. Kattán Investments *	20. Callejas Investments
5. Goldstein Group	13. Military Investments	21. Sikaffy Investments *
6. Andonie Fernández Investments *	14. Bamer Investments	22. Handal Investments *
7. Inversiones Williams	15. Larach Investments *	23. Honduras Investments
8. El Ahorro Hondureño S.A.	16. Canahuati Investments *	24. Transnational Companies

Source: Flores (1990).

1 Other families of Palestinian descent include the Atala family, who control the banking-finance sector, and the Nasser family, who control the energy and fuels sector in Honduras.  
2 Carlos Flores Facussé was elected president in 1998, and Palestinian entrepreneurs involved in politics include Mario Canahuati, who was the Minister of Foreign Relations from 2010-11.

3 All immigrants and descendents of immigrants from the Middle Eastern region are called “*turcos*” in Honduras, which means Turks, since many entered the country in the early 20th century with passports from the former Turkish Ottoman Empire.

Buses, pots, grease, cable TV, pork chops, lives, Santa Claus...bottled water, sardines, hospitals, live broadcasting, airplane traffic, land for growing African palms for oil, the customs office at Amatillo...high officials, the police, soap, the potatoes we eat, peasants from El Aguán...Michelletti and Pepe Lobo... everything, everything, everything is owned by Miguel Facussé, Everything.<sup>4</sup> (Excerpt from “*Todo, todo es de Miguel Facussé*” *Artistas en Resistencia*, April 28, 2010 Vos del Soberano.com)

Over the course of the 20th century, Palestinians were able to emerge as an economic elite without having to mobilize an ethnic identity publicly demanding collective rights and access to resources. This is due to political, social, and economic processes occurring globally and nationally which favored Palestinian immigrant entrepreneurs and merchants, particularly through the accumulation of different forms of capital —i.e., economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu 2010)— albeit facing discrimination in the host society.

Palestinians began to arrive in the early 20th century on the Caribbean Coast of Honduras, also known as the North Coast, which at the time was an economic enclave dominated by foreign companies (mainly from the United States) that controlled the production and export of the country’s main crop: bananas. The world market and global migration flows from Europe and the Middle East to the Americas in the early 20th century shaped the reality of the North Coast, which quickly became a thriving economic center permeated by transnational flows and networks set up and sustained by foreign companies and immigrants from Europe, the United States, the Caribbean (especially Jamaica), Central America and the Middle East (Soluri 2005; Euraque 1996). The Honduran government contributed to setting up and sustaining this transnationalized region by establishing a concessionary system that gave foreign companies and immigrants access to resources (e.g. land) with little or no taxation. Immigrants and foreign companies also benefitted from the Honduran government’s immigration policy, which sought mainly to attract European immigrants, hoping they would develop the country and improve the Honduran “race”, i.e., by “whitening” Hondurans. Palestinians and other immigrants labeled “Arabs” were not denied entry, but they were nonetheless undesirable in the eyes of state officials and locals.

Palestinian immigrants started out as peddlers and later began to work in commerce and trade. Many could count on considerable human and economic capital because they had access to education in their homelands (González 1992; Norris 2012). Furthermore, there are reasons to believe that many of these immigrants belonged to the Arab Christian elite when Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire and later when it was under British rule.

Prominent in every profession and present at every level of politics, Arab Christian leaders did not view themselves as part of a disenfranchised threatened community; they considered themselves central actors in Palestine’s emergence as a modern Arab nation (Robson 2011, 6).

Palestinians’ high levels of human capital, access to capital abroad, knowledge of various languages and innovative ways of selling products (such as buying and selling on credit) enabled them to set up businesses that targeted non-ethnic, urban consumer markets without much competition.

Family and kinship relations, endogamic marriages and initial seclusion and isolation from the host society all helped to consolidate Palestinian businesses, which focused on retail import and export throughout the North Coast, and to accumulate and concentrate economic capital within the community (González 1992; Euraque 1996 y 1998). The absence of a national oligarchy and a nascent merchant class in Honduras further helped to cement Palestinian merchants’ and entrepreneurs’ businesses (Foroohar 2011; Torres-Rivas 1993). By the 1920s, Palestinian merchants dominated the urban commercial infrastructure of the North Coast (Euraque 1996).

The rise of Palestinians as a minority class of middlemen allowed them to continue expanding their economic capital as well as to acquire social capital when economic and political changes occurred in the mid-20th century in Honduras and elsewhere in Central America. Political issues in the home society —namely the creation of the state of Israel— also forced many Palestinian immigrants to take up permanent residence in Honduras.

The establishment of the Central American Common Market (CACM) by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean created new opportunity structures for entrepreneurs. In 1958, the Honduran government passed the Industrialization Development Law for the purpose of promoting industry and manufacturing on a national level. The law exempted busi-

4 To see complete poem: <[http://voselsoberano.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=5180:todo-todo-es-de-miguel-facusse&catid=2:opinion](http://voselsoberano.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5180:todo-todo-es-de-miguel-facusse&catid=2:opinion)>.

nesses from paying taxes and tariffs (Euraque 1996; Posas and del Cid 1983). Furthermore, the 1958 Industrialization Law diversified businesses and the capital of local entrepreneurs, immigrant businessmen like the Palestinians, and foreign companies. It particularly favored U.S. banana companies which had established a complex financial structure extending far beyond the production and export of bananas, to cover sugar production, garment manufacturing and even a brewery, with investors both from the foreign company and from among the affluent local entrepreneurs of San Pedro Sula.

Palestinian entrepreneurs did not participate in these joint ventures until the 1950s. Nevertheless, Palestinian investments had already surpassed those of local and other immigrant investors by the first half of the century. The new industrialization policies changed Palestinian entrepreneurs' traditional investment pattern, which consisted of family and kinship relationships and networks with co-ethnics both in Honduras and abroad. They began investing in local and foreign companies' joint ventures by buying shares. For instance, affluent Palestinian families such as the Larachs, Siwadys, Kattans and Canahuatis invested in the businesses of local entrepreneur Roberto Fasquelle, as well as the cement industry which was a joint venture with the Standard Fruit Company and was also headed by a local entrepreneur, Gabriel Mejía (Euraque 1996).

Thus, under the 1958 Industrialization Law, state concessions which continued throughout this period—i.e., modern public institutions that channeled international funds and made capital available—, and a burgeoning regional market backed up by international institutions favored the expansion of entrepreneurship in general. Palestinian entrepreneurs benefitted from these government policies because they had amassed economic capital through their businesses, fulfilling only minimum requirements to obtain both credit and tax exemptions. Joint ventures with local elites allowed Palestinian entrepreneurs to expand their economic capital by reaching out to other non-ethnic consumer groups—those linked to foreign companies, thus broadening their own trading network—and to acquire new forms of capital, particularly social capital, which positioned them politically with the San Pedro Sula elites and entrepreneurs.

New opportunity structures favored affluent local entrepreneurs as well as Palestinian businessmen when Honduras transitioned to democracy in the early 1980s, and

particularly when neoliberal policies were introduced in the 1990s. On the one hand, democratization brought political stability, which was much needed in a region long affected by armed conflict and civil war. On the other hand, neoliberalism introduced market-oriented policies with little interference or regulation by the state, which meant opening up the economy to foreign investment and transnational capital.

The political groups that emerged in this new politico-economic context were mostly influential entrepreneurs—many of Palestinian descent—that had accumulated and expanded their economic and social capital in previous decades under the industrialization policies. Palestinian entrepreneurs had established alliances with the high-ranking military officials who were in power and managed most of the state's resources, as well as with both traditional and newly-emerging political and economic groups. Palestinian entrepreneurs also became active members of one of the country's main political parties, the Liberal or National Party. Social capital was sustained and reproduced through an "entrepreneurial network" (Meza 2009) in which informal and formal pacts with other regional and political elites (i.e., the military and the land-owning elites) facilitated the social mobility of entrepreneurs. This entrepreneurial network continued throughout the 1980s under the new "civilian" governments,<sup>5</sup> helping entrepreneurs to consolidate their role under the new democratic regime as well as to become incorporated into the structure of the political elite.<sup>6</sup>

The influence and activities of entrepreneurs in politics grew stronger in the 1980s as they funded presidential campaigns and modernized the nation's political machinery. Many affluent Palestinian entrepreneurial families (e.g., the Facussés, Canahuatis and Larachs) became actively involved in politics, promoting neoliberal policies and being elected to public office. The election of

5 The military were still in power in the 1980s even though Honduras had formally become a democracy.

6 For instance, Gen. Gustavo Álvarez Martínez, the military chief of staff, founded the *Asociación para el Progreso de Honduras* (APROH) with reputable entrepreneurs, among them Palestinian Miguel Facussé who acted as vice president. APROH was a conservative, right-wing association that became a major policy-making center in the early eighties (Schulz and Sundloff 1994). Not only did APROH influence the newly elected government's economic policy, but its vice president, Palestinian entrepreneur Miguel Facussé, also became economic advisor to the president. His "*Memorando Facussé*", which he wrote with other entrepreneurs, laid out the strategic economic plan for the country in the 1980s. Facussé drafted another economic proposal in the 1990s for President Carlos Roberto Reina.

one of the country's major entrepreneurs in 1990, as well as two others in 1998 and 2002—one of them of Palestinian descent—and their active involvement in establishing a neoliberal agenda for the country, from which they would benefit, indicate not only the emergence of entrepreneurs as an economic and political elite, but also the successful incorporation of Palestinian entrepreneurs into elite economic and political structures due to their accumulation of different forms of capital, which did not require them to mobilize to establish themselves as an ethnic identity.

### **"Palestinian" Identity and Cultural Difference**

As the previous section has shown, Palestinian entrepreneurs and merchants gained access to resources and accumulated sufficient forms of capital throughout the 20th century *without* mobilizing an ethnic identity for collective rights and despite being discriminated against or considered undesirable immigrants even today. First of all, Palestinians had human capital as well as skills and knowledge in commerce and trade upon arriving in Honduras. They were able to enter the country even when Honduran immigration policies attempted to restrict their entry by imposing a higher entry tariff (Amaya 1997; Euraque 1998). Second, the absence of a local merchant class and a national oligarchy, as well as the Honduran government's concessionary system in the early 20th century, allowed Palestinian merchants and entrepreneurs to cater to non-ethnic consumer markets without much competition. Third, Palestinian entrepreneurs and merchants cemented their access to resources and capital expansion thanks to the industrialization policies of the 1950s which incorporated Palestinian businesses into the country's macro-economic structures. Furthermore, Palestinian entrepreneurs were able to acquire enough social capital to enter the elite structures as well as to influence the country's politics and economic policies in the 1990s under neoliberalism. Thus, various macro and local economic, political and social processes favored the social mobility of Palestinian entrepreneurs. This partly explains why Palestinians did not resort to mobilizing an ethnic identity for collective rights to gain access to resources, since there was no need for them to do so.

Another factor is the national ideology of Honduras, which is strongly anchored in *mestizaje*, i.e., the racial mix of indigenous and European blood. Throughout

the 20th century, *mestizaje* has become the hegemonic discourse of nation-building that privileges the "European-oriented" mestizo over the deeply "revered" indigenous element (Hale 2005). Traditionally, it excludes the indigenous groups and those of African descendants, as well as other minorities (Asians, Jews, Middle Easterners) from being historical subjects of nation-building. This seems to be changing as a result of multiculturalism, in which neoliberal governments in many Latin American countries not only recognize the cultural rights of minorities, particularly indigenous groups and blacks, but also "produce cultural difference" in order to carry out the neoliberal project with little challenge (Hale 2005). Nevertheless, *mestizaje*—and multiculturalism—are both deeply rooted in racialized binaries (that is, Indian and European) and colonial classifications that racially inferiorize people of African descent and indigenous groups, and also exclude Palestinian immigrants and their descendants. For instance, through Presidential Agreement 0719-EP of August 1994, Honduras was declared to be a multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multilingual society. However, the Honduran state recognizes only nine ethnic minorities: the Lencas, Misquitos, Tolupanes, Pech, Maya-Chortí, Tawahka, Nahoas, Garífunas and Isleños. Middle Eastern immigrants and their descendants (as well as Jews and Asians) are not recognized as an ethnic minority. Interestingly, this absence or exclusion of Palestinians, Arabs or Middle Easterners has encouraged and produced the cultural differences that distinguish the Palestinian community today.

The mestizo national discourse and ideology emerged in the early 20th century against the backdrop of the banana enclave (Euraque 2003). As pointed out in the previous section, the banana enclave was a thriving economic center with a great number of immigrants from Europe, the Caribbean, Central America, Asia and the Middle East. Local elites were worried about the influx of undesirable immigrants, fearing racial mixture with black Caribbean immigrants who worked on the banana plantations or with the local black population—i.e., the Garífunas. The mestizo national discourse which sought to establish "Indians" as the other race in mestizo Hondurans was a "nationalistic response within the limitations of Indo-Hispanic *mestizaje* that excludes blacks" (Euraque 2003, 243).

Just as the elite mestizo discourse excluded blacks as central historical subjects in the history of the banana-growing industry, so too did it exclude Middle Eastern immigrants, in particular, Palestinian merchants and

entrepreneurs, as historical subjects in the economic history of Honduras throughout the 20th century. One reason for this was the host society elite's perception of Palestinians as temporary immigrants and as a secluded group that did not 'mix racially' with locals. Indeed, Palestinians were relatively isolated in the first half of the 20th century due to their clannishness, particularly due to the practice of endogamic marriages (González 1992; Amaya 1997). For many of them, Honduras was truly intended to be a temporary place of residence where the purpose was to save enough capital and return to the home society, and some actually did return. Furthermore, many perceived Honduras as a poor, underdeveloped country. The racial/ethnic representations of Honduras (and Latin America in general) in the minds of Palestinians (and other Middle Easterners) as poor, pre-modern, and uncivilized, appear to be embedded in previous hierarchical racial/ethnic constructions of the Americas that stem from "nationalist and imperialist ideologies from the Middle East, [particularly] Ottoman representations of the New World" (Pastor 2012, 3).

Interestingly, against the backdrop of discrimination and isolation in the host society, Palestinians mobilized an "Arab" identity, which emerged vis-à-vis the mestizo ideology, in the first half of the 20th century. In the 1920s and 30s, Palestinians created various associations such as the *Asociación Femenina Hondureña Árabe* (Women's Honduran Arab Association), the *Sociedad Juventud Unión Árabe* (Society of Arab Youth), and the *Centro Social Hondureño Árabe* (Honduran Arab Social Center) which not only established transnational networks that provided different forms of support to Palestinian immigrant families, but also mobilized an "Arab" identity.

However, in the second half of the 20th century, this "Arab" identity gradually disappeared from the public sphere as Palestinians acquired more social capital and became incorporated into the elite structures, particularly on the North Coast, and because of racial tensions with the political elites of Tegucigalpa in the late 1960s, who threatened to expel Palestinian immigrant entrepreneurs from the country<sup>7</sup> (Euraque 1996). Nevertheless, associations and institutions set up by the Palestinian community played a central role

in maintaining and constructing an identity as well as the features and references that currently distinguish them culturally.

Two organizations in particular contributed to establishing a transnational support network for the Palestinian community and cultural references that distinguish Palestinians in Honduras: the *Sociedad Juventud Unión Árabe* (Society of Arab Youth or SUJA) and the Orthodox Christian Church. The short-lived SUJA was founded in 1930 in San Pedro Sula by Jesús Larach and Jesús Sahuri. It organized regular meetings where Palestinian immigrants could eat food from their homelands, listen and dance to their traditional music, speak Arabic and talk about their experience in the host society. SUJA established a radio program called *La Hora Árabe* and a weekly newspaper called *Rumbos*, which published poems, editorials, and articles written by first- and second-generation Palestinians as well as Arab poets like Gibran Khalil. It also published news reports about Palestinian communities in different countries and updates on events occurring in the home societies. SUJA rapidly extended to other cities in the country, e.g., Tegucigalpa, La Ceiba, Tela, as well as other countries, e.g., Guatemala, El Salvador, Cuba, Mexico and Nicaragua, thus establishing a transnational social network that connected Palestinian immigrant communities through media (newspaper and radio programs) and meetings. It also forged an "Arab" identity vis-à-vis the mestizo identity that was linked to transnational emancipation movements occurring in the homeland and neighboring countries (Syria and Lebanon) that promoted Pan-Arabism.

The Orthodox Christian Church has also played an important role in establishing transnational social ties and networks linking Palestinian communities in various cities. Founded in 1963 under the jurisdiction of Archbishop Antonio Chedraoui, the Honduran Orthodox Christian Church forms part of the Archdiocese of Mexico, Venezuela, Central America and the Caribbean. Members of this church meet regularly in one of these countries to discuss future activities and needs of the church—for instance, maintaining membership participation—as well as sharing their experiences. The Orthodox Christian churches are linked transnationally; their networks and ties stretch across various regions in Latin America and even back to the Middle East (e.g. Syria).

The Orthodox Christian Church has emerged as a major reference point for many Palestinians in Honduras and Central America. More than 600 Palestinian

<sup>7</sup> Euraque (1996) narrates in detail the active participation and support of Palestinian entrepreneurs who were part of the North Coast elite, for the social movements of the late 1960s. This unleashed xenophobic reactions among the military who were in power at the time.

families consider themselves Orthodox, celebrating weddings, baptisms and other religious events.<sup>8</sup> Anyone who marries a Palestinian immigrant or one of their descendants is expected to convert to the Orthodox Christian Church. This is common among non-Palestinian Honduran women who started marrying Palestinian men in the second half of the 20th century, and whose children are traditionally brought up as Orthodox Christians.

Aside from providing this sense of belonging to the Palestinian community, the Orthodox Christian Church also promotes cultural references through education. It works closely with the San Juan Bautista School in San Pedro Sula. Founded in the early 1990s and headed by Orthodox priest Carlos Faraj, the school is oriented mainly to children belonging to the Palestinian community. The languages of instruction are Arabic, Spanish and English, and students not only learn about their Middle Eastern heritage and culture, but also perform Arab dances.<sup>9</sup> School celebrations such as graduations and other ceremonies are held at the *Club Social Hondureño Árabe* (Honduran Arab Social Club), another organization in which most Palestinians are members.

The cultural references that circulate among Palestinians today are linked to the “Arab/Pan-Arab” identity that originally appeared in the first half of the 20th century, promoted by SUJA, and to a recent identification of Palestine as a homeland. For instance, the *Centro Social Hondureño Árabe*, established in 1968 in response to the local elite’s discrimination against Palestinian immigrants who were not allowed to become members of the Club Sanpedrano, is today the most opulent country club in Honduras, with tennis courts, sushi bars, restaurants and banquet halls. It is headed by textile magnate and businessman Juan Canahuati and has around 1,600 members who are mostly Palestinians or of Palestinian descent. In one interview, the center’s supervisor stated that the social center/club not only helps to maintain the bonds of the Palestinian community, but also represents their sense of socializing and community in the following words: “The community has looked for forums to socialize and to maintain our bond, and this club is a consummation of that feeling” (Wachter 2006). Aside from being a place for socialization of the Palestinian community in San Pedro Sula, the *Club Social Hondureño Árabe* maintains cultural refer-

ences that are linked to the homeland, such as naming the main banquet-halls “Jerusalem,” “Bethlehem” and “Palestine,” and selling traditional Arabic food, such as falafel, kibbes and babaganoush.

In recent decades, “Palestine” has become a more common reference as opposed to the idea of an “Arab” identity that emerged in the first half of the 20th century, particularly among those whose parents or grandparents arrived after the creation of the state of Israel, or the first and second Intifada. I recall a conversation with a girl of Palestinian descent from San Pedro Sula who constantly corrected me when I used the word “Arab” to refer to her father, “*Palestinian*, my dad is Palestinian.” The reference to “Palestine” has become fixed and stronger among the Palestinian community in recent decades. This is partly because of nationalist movements in the home society, which seek the creation of a Palestinian state, and which some first-generation Palestinian immigrants in Honduras follow and support. A local historian who has studied Palestinian migration confirmed the latter, showing me a stack of copies of the newspaper collection of a second-generation Palestinian who had been following the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Tegucigalpa for over 20 years. The use of new technologies, especially cable TV, and trips to the homeland have reinforced ties with the home society. For instance, while doing fieldwork in San Pedro Sula, I went several times to the house of a Honduran woman married to a first-generation Palestinian who immigrated in the early 1960s and identifies himself as Palestinian. They are both retired and spend most of their time at home. The Honduran wife told me that when her husband was younger, he travelled almost every year to his birthplace, Bethlehem. Old age and illness has prevented him from travelling in recent years, but he still remains connected to the society of his homeland,

[My husband] would go every year to Palestine and stay for about two months to visit his family, his mother especially. He stopped going because he’s aged and sick and, well, also his mother passed away. His siblings are all over the place, in Chile, the US and here...Now he stays here [home] almost all day watching his channels on cable and in Arabic. So he knows what’s going on in Palestine. (Wife of first-generation Palestinian, pers.comm.)

Trips to the home society reinforce ties with the homeland and fix the notion of “Palestine.” It is common for second- and third-generation Palestinians

8 See: <[http://www.iglesiaortodoxa.org.mx/informacion/?page\\_id=178](http://www.iglesiaortodoxa.org.mx/informacion/?page_id=178)>.

9 See: <[http://www.luxner.com/cgi-bin/view\\_article.cgi?articleID=980](http://www.luxner.com/cgi-bin/view_article.cgi?articleID=980)>.



to go to their parents' town of origin at least once in their lifetime for the purpose of meeting grandparents and other family members. The experience of travelling and meeting family members can be frustrating and disappointing for these second- and third-generation Palestinians who feel disconnected because of language barriers, i.e., not knowing Arabic, or being members of the host society, while not knowing Spanish.

Aside from sharing hometowns —e.g., Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, and Beit Jala— and professing allegiance to the Orthodox Church, being an active merchant or entrepreneur emerges as another collective feature that distinguishes Palestinian immigrants and their descendants. Palestinian knowledge and skills in trans-regional commerce and trade was acquired in their society of origin, where the peddling and trade of religious artifacts and trinkets from the “Holy Land” were common. As Norris points out, towns such as Bethlehem —where many Palestinian immigrants in Honduras come from— had become an important trading center by the early 19th century:

“[Bethlehem] had become the manufacturing center of a global trade in Christian (and later also Muslim) objects of devotion. This in turn allowed merchants from the town to branch out all over the world by the middle of the century, often enjoying considerable commercial success.” (Norris 2012, 1)

Being a merchant was common in Bethlehem as well as in Beit Sahour and Beit Jala, the other two towns from which most Palestinian immigrants have come. It was also common for Bethlehem merchants to migrate not only because of their difficult politico-economic situation as part of the Ottoman Empire, but also because it was part of a merchant's activity,

“Rather than representing a permanent escape route from poverty and military conscription, migration for Bethlehemites in the nineteenth century was a decidedly transitory experience, mostly consisting of young men establishing trading posts where they would live temporarily but regularly return to the hometown.” (Norris 2012, 2)

Circulatory migratory patterns were common well into the 20th century among Bethlehemites, most of whom enjoyed commercial success (González 1992; Amaya 1997; Norris 2012). Yet, as I have shown in the case of Palestinians in Honduras, some immigrants settled perma-

nently in the host society, becoming well-established as merchants and entrepreneurs, and even emerging as members of an economic elite.

Being a merchant or active in commerce and trade has become a cultural feature of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants from Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, who more recently have decided to call their place of origin “Palestine,” due to the nation-based forms of identity and belonging that have emerged with the creation of the state of Israel and Eastern Mediterranean politics in the 20th century<sup>10</sup> (Norris 2012). This has led to the emergence of a “commercial/merchant” identity that distinguishes the Palestinian community. “Victor,” a first-generation Palestinian I met in San Pedro Sula, formerly a Bethlehem policeman who immigrated in the 1960s, pointed out that knowing how to do commerce and trade is what makes Palestinians stand out,

“I arrived first to Santiago (Chile) because my sister lived there. Looking for a job, one day I got in a taxi and told the driver, ‘take me where all the commerce is.’ I knew I’d find people from my hometown there because that is what we are known for, doing *comercio*. But I didn’t like Santiago, so I moved up to Honduras, where I have another sister. And here too I knew that all I had to do was go to the store areas to meet my people. This is what we know how to do very well.” (“Victor” first-generation Palestinian migrant, San Pedro Sula, pers.comm.)

Working in commerce and trade has been a central activity of Palestinian families for various generations, both in the home and host societies. Palestinian merchants and entrepreneurs encourage their children to engage in this activity, seeing it as a way to develop values like hard work and responsibility, and secure the family business, as an interview and report of entrepreneur Napoleón Larach Jamis indicates,

“My generation knows about hard work, constant work and effort; the next generation, [my] grandchildren are being educated with this culture toward work”, manifested [Napoleón Larach Jamis] entrepreneur from San Pedro Sula who studied economy in Santiago de Chile... As head of the family, [Napoleón Larach Jamis] has assured that traditional values such as honesty, work

<sup>10</sup> Norris (2012) also points out that the British colonial state started restricting the circular flows of Arab migration, which were common among Bethlehemites in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries.

and tolerance, which his own parents passed on to him and his brother, be passed on to his own children...For a successful transfer of skills to the new generation, Larach Jamis delegated specific responsibilities to his children so that they develop their own creativity with the purpose that they learned about committing to their own entrepreneurial activities. (Forjadores 2005)

Businesses and companies are generally seen as family patrimony, and family and kinship relations are still evident in Palestinian immigrants' commercial and trade activities. Family and kinship relations started to play a significant role in Palestinian commercial activities when they opened stores in various cities on the North Coast, contributing to establishing trade networks with other Palestinian merchants all along the North Coast in the early 20th century, as well as abroad, due to their activity of importing products for their retail stores. Family members such as wives, siblings or cousins, who worked in the stores as paid and unpaid labor, helped sustain the family enterprise. Furthermore, Palestinian immigrant businesses have relied on patrimonial management strategies —i.e., businesses in which ownership, major policy-making positions and other significant jobs in the hierarchy are held by members of the extended family— in order to expand family businesses and increase their wealth (González 1992).

The identity and cultural references I have discussed so far —commercial/merchant identity, being part of the Orthodox Church— remain mostly in the private sphere within the Palestinian community. Throughout the 20th century, the identity that has appeared —first against the backdrop of mestizo discourses and ideologies and later, in recent decades, against the backdrop of a multicultural Honduras— did not seek to gain access to resources, collective rights or cultural recognition of the Palestinian community as an ethnic minority. As I have been discussing throughout this article, the privileged economic position of Palestinian immigrants in the early 20th century and local/regional factors (e.g. the lack of a national oligarchy or a nascent merchant class, and the emergence of CACM) and politico-economic factors in the home societies (e.g. creation of the state of Israel) have given them access to resources in Honduras and abroad on a sustainable basis without political mobilization. Even though Palestinians did not mobilize an identity to obtain collective rights or cultural recognition, identity references did in fact emerge, not only undergoing transformation throughout the 20th century, but also culturally distinguishing the Palestinian community within the host society. Far from being an assimilated group, the existence of these cultural identity references

in the private sphere indicate that Palestinian immigrants and their descendants are indeed a culturally distinct group in mestizo and multicultural Honduras.

## Conclusions

This article looks at Palestinian immigrants and their descendants in Latin America, focusing on the case of Honduras. It questions the assumption that Palestinians are an assimilated group, elaborating on the argument that there are features and references that distinguish them as a culturally distinct group in a society whose national ideology and discourse is anchored in the concept of *mestizaje*. The article also discusses the factors underlying the “absence” of a Palestinian identity —at least in public— especially against the backdrop of multiculturalism in Honduras.

Unlike other minority groups in Honduras (e.g. indigenous groups and those of African descent), Palestinians have not mobilized an ethnic identity in order to gain access to resources or collective rights. The article shows that this is because Palestinian immigrants have benefitted from macro-economic and political factors such as Honduras' enclave economy, import-substitution and neoliberalism, as well as local factors like the lack of a merchant class or a national oligarchy, and the government's concessionary system. Furthermore, Palestinians arrived with human capital, particularly their knowledge of and skill in trans-regional commerce and trade. These factors have allowed Palestinians to acquire sufficient economic, cultural and social capital to position themselves economically and politically in Honduras, without mobilizing any ethnic identity.

This does not mean that no identity emerged at all. The article discusses an “Arab” identity that emerged vis-à-vis the mestizo identity in the first half of the 20th century, as well as its transformation in recent decades. Different Palestinian associations and organizations, particularly the Orthodox Christian Church, have played an important role in constructing and maintaining identity and cultural references that distinguish Palestinian immigrants and their descendants today. “Palestine” is identified as the homeland among recent generations — as opposed to the first generation who identified their hometowns, e.g., Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala, as their birthplace. The common identification of “Palestine” as their homeland today is due to social and political events that have occurred in the Middle East since WW II, particularly during the Israeli-Palestine conflict,

due to the emergence of nationalist movements in Palestinian territories and the sustained networks and flows between the Palestinian immigrant community in Honduras and their homeland.

Some features of the “Pan Arab” identity from the first half of the 20th century remain to this day (e.g. traditional food and music, and the learning of Arabic) and are being reproduced in certain institutions that require membership, such as the Orthodox Christian Church and the *Club Social Árabe-Hondureño*. Work in commerce and trade, especially in family businesses, has also become a common reference point, not only for incoming immigrants, but for third- and fourth-generation Palestinians in Honduras as well.

Palestinians are a culturally distinct group in Honduras. Their social ties and networks, which were originally partly organized and backed up by social and religious institutions and associations, not only link them with Palestinian immigrant communities across various parts of the world (e.g. Chile, the United States, Central America and the Caribbean, as well with homeland societies), but also circulate among common socio-cultural references such as religious affiliations and commercial activities. Emergence as a culturally distinct—as opposed to assimilated—group is not limited to Palestinians in Honduras. Palestinians in Chile have also integrated into the host society’s social fabric, “while preserving cultural identity” (El-Hattar 2011, 203).

Finally, exploring the Palestinian community in a small region like the Caribbean Coast of Honduras sheds light on the need to understand the economic and social history of Central America and the Caribbean from a perspective that considers Middle Eastern immigrants (as well as Asians and Jews) to be historical subjects. A decolonial perspective can be useful in providing a different map, “a different global cartography of power than what political-economy paradigms provide” (Grosfóguel 2009, 10). Central American and Caribbean historiographies are largely framed within the region’s colonial and western thought processes (e.g. trade circuits and social exchanges and flows from the colonial period or European and US Imperialism of the 19th and 20th centuries). However, as this article indicates, other trade circuits and social ties and networks established by non-European immigrants also emerged in Central America and the Caribbean. In this sense, the Palestinian migratory experience can help shift the traditional lens both for representing and narrating Central America and the Caribbean as well as for decolonizing their economic and social histories. †

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