

Palestine International Institute

Aspiring to Bind Palestinians in Diaspora
And Expatriates to the Homeland

**The Bethlehem Emigré Communities in Latin
America**

Foreword

The Palestine International Institute (PII) pioneers in producing studies provided by researchers in the Diaspora in coordination with the Institute, under the broad category, 'Palestinians in Diaspora'. This time we are pleased to present our readers with the 2008 reviewed and updated edition of our study titled, 'The 3 Palestinian Community in Sweden'. This study falls under the category of the 'Horizontal Studies' series which examines the emergence and evolution of communities and tackles issues related to the origins, structure, makeup, size, problems and challenge of Palestinian communities in the Diaspora. The PII also issues the 'Parallel Studies' series which are supplemental studies with indirect bearing on communities, such as the study on Arab-European relationships. These studies are overseen and supervised by the executive chairman and the research team. Before scrutinizing the data, statistics and information contained in this study, we wish to indicate that it presents academic insight based on scientific and objective research. This is indeed one of the goals for which PII has been established. Our researchers have exerted considerable effort in order to overcome the difficulties imposed by the scarcity of resources and documents in

an attempt to achieve integrated, rather than fractured data at a time when scientific research is considerably lacking and insignificant. The importance of this study, as well as other PII studies, emerges from a number of factors, the most important of which are the following:

- It comes as an early harvest in virgin territory, where documents and sources of information on these subjects, in both Arab and foreign libraries, are virtually nonexistent, including the Internet and centers which specialize in Palestinian issues.

- No scholar or institution has come up with a partial, needless to say complete, series of studies about Palestinians in the Diaspora in countries where they exist, or about communities in the countries which have hosted Palestinians. Despite all, we acknowledge that the present study is in its early stages and is open to further development and expansion on the basis of professionalism, authenticity, transparency and documentation, and with the intent of being broadened and updated. Our mission and duty dictate that we ensure it is subject to the above processes in each of its new editions. The PII welcomes any comments on the development of its studies and scientific and research references with the aim of achieving its final goals and

aspirations. If it appears that we are slightly lagging, it is because our human and financial resources are limited and the conditions under which research is being conducted are difficult.

The time to pick the fruits of our labors is near. All this has been the result of efforts exerted by a dedicated team, despite our humble resources. Our gratitude goes to all scholars and researchers who have contributed to this and other studies which aim to reach those interested, address their patriotic, national, human and intellectual aspirations, and reveal facts and data previously unknown to those who have previously had no access to such information. We further reiterate our desire to receive feedback and urge our readers to send us their comments and suggestions which would serve to improve or advance our studies.

As'ad Abdul-Rahman,

Executive Director

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Introduction

Since the last decade of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, there have been important migratory flows from Palestine to countries all over Latin America, especially Chile and Honduras. This has created large communities which have adapted and helped develop their host countries while keeping their identity and cultural values as Palestinians, as well as an important connection with their families and their hometowns. In this report we assess the relations and interactions between the communities living in Latin America from Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, as well as the political, economic and social influence they have in both their places of origin and the countries they currently live in.

The Israeli occupation is an important issue that marks the everyday life of all the Palestinians, even those who live abroad. Therefore, a better understanding of the connection between the Palestinian communities here and in other countries can help to generate strategies of solidarity towards the conflict in the host countries.

There is a lack of reliable and official statistic information about the population of Palestinian origin in Latin American countries, so most of the data of the report comes from organization websites, interviews with diplomatic representatives, experts on the matter and regular people who have relatives in Latin America or who have lived there for part of their life and then come back.

Historical Background

Throughout history there has been a significant flow of Palestinian people to different places around the globe. The motives for these migrations are many; the constant clashes between power groups and the changes in regime have long destabilized the region. Latin America has long been perceived as one of the safe havens for Palestinians to travel to. These flows can be grouped into two main historical moments: from 1890 to 1920, and from 1947 to 1960.

The first migrations happened when Palestinians tried to escape the hardships of the Turkish dominion, causing a sustained flow from 1890 to 1930. The forceful recruitment into the Turkish army, the cruelties of the declining regime, and the need for new sources of livelihood caused the migrants to search for new places to live. Because they left with Turkish passports, they were grouped together with other Arabs, such as Syrians and Lebanese people, and sometimes discriminated against under the term "Turcos."

Many immigrants had North America as their first choice, but arrived in Latin America due to careless maritime agents who sold passages to "America", but never specified the name of the port of arrival. Other families simply moved south looking for better job opportunities. Once certain colonies were established, family ties, and the expectancy of wealth, were enough incentive for other families to follow.

The majority of the Palestinians who arrived in Latin America were Christian; although there was a certain difference with the local population, since most practiced the Greek Orthodox Rite, different from the Roman Catholic rite generally practiced in Latin America. These families used the church as a

connection to their native land, they had house meetings when a priest was not available, and returned home to perform the most important sacraments in their family church, either in Bethlehem, Beit Jala, or Beit Sahour.

Very few Muslim families arrived, probably because of the lack of identification with the Latin American Culture. There is a small community of Muslim Palestinians in El Salvador and in Chile. The first Mosque in Latin America was not built until 1995, in Santiago de Chile. Of these families, not all of them kept their Islamic origin, because there were few schools or leaders to teach them, many changed their faith to integrate better into the catholic society.

Once the families were established, and started to learn Spanish or Portuguese, they would attend the Roman Church. Some of the members of the Orthodox Church started changing their rite for the Catholic Rite, or converting from Islam into Catholicism. As Mr Larach mentioned in his interview, some Palestinians who had lived three generations in Honduras, started to integrate and are hard to differentiate from other Hondurans.

A second moment for the migration started in 1947, during the Nakba or Tragedy, known to the world as the war of independence of Israel. The arrival of Palestinians augmented notoriously, due to the hostilities between Arabs and Jews and the establishment of the Israeli state. This was when the first Muslim families arrived in Latin America.

There has been no formal effort to count or build statistical information, but today it is believed that approximately 500.000 Palestinians live in Latin America. There is a cultural disconnection between the communities on both sides of the world, due to the partial integration of Palestinian families to their new home, and the distance from everyday issues in everyday life.

We interviewed a few people who think many Emigrants have lost the interest to remind people of their origin, which as we know will happen to any integrated group. However this report focuses mainly on the way the communities are still connected, which is significant. We will try to address how family ties are not severed, and these communities still cling to their origins, participating inside their countries in many ways. The activities of the civil society are notorious. There are social clubs, schools, and medical initiatives, political and religious organizations that still link Palestinians to Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour.

The nature of the “Turco” concept

The unifying “Turco” label used in most of Latin America is meant to group together three main ethnic groups: Arabs of Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian nationalities; Armenians and finally Turks. Because these groups arrived showing the same passport from the Ottoman Empire, they were seen as people of the same cultural origin. Although Arabs were not banned from entering any Latin American country, they were also not expected to migrate.

This label is not only used to stereotype but has also caused a certain level of discrimination. It is important to mention that the migrating Palestinian communities created new wealth in Latin America, especially in commercial and industrial activities that contributed to many countries growth. Because of this, the general perception is that all Arabs are wealthy.

Even though some of the people interviewed for this report, who now live in Latin America, were not well informed of the exact situation of the Palestinian people, they remain

interested and feel closely the plight of those still living in Palestine.

Problems under Occupation: A Struggle that Reflects Internationally under the Israeli occupation, the Palestinians suffer from many challenges, such as lack of freedom of transit and inability to visit their places of worship, confiscation of lands, house demolitions, and harassment by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), unemployment and restrictions on water resources, amongst other violations of their human rights. This day by day struggle makes some Palestinians look towards their relatives abroad to leave the West Bank and find better living conditions.

According to Elias Tanas, the main reasons why young people want to migrate to Honduras nowadays are the lack of work and progress opportunities and the restriction of liberties.

Most of the men and women who finish university perceive that there is no future for them in the West Bank, so there is a constant atmosphere of uncertainty and frustration amongst the younger generations. Also, according to Dr. Issa Kheir, the income in Bethlehem is much lower than the one a professional could earn in Honduras.

Some families that returned to the Bethlehem district have young sons and daughters that were actually born in the Latin American countries. Their perceptions of an occupied Palestine makes them miss their other “home” and they feel detached from the land of their parents, with a strong desire to leave and find opportunities and freedom elsewhere.

Probably the most important limitation faced by Palestinian communities overseas is the control of the borders and identity or residence documents by Israel. After a year living abroad, Palestinian identity documents are not valid anymore. The arrangements to renew these documents take a

long process which according to most of the interviewees for this report, is intended to deter people from returning. According to Xavier Abu Eid, 140,000 people have lost their residence for leaving the West Bank for a certain amount of time during the occupation. This problem forces many Palestinians to enter and leave as tourists with a three month visa until their identity problem is solved. Many exiles opt to just come for the summer or for a few months to visit their relatives and stay at their homes, if they have properties, and then return to their host countries.

Many people from Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour try to obtain foreign passports because of the restrictions implicated in having Palestinian nationality, such as the acquirement of visas for traveling to other countries. Even with having a Latin American passport, Palestinians who wish to travel have to fly through Jordan as they are not allowed to enter Israeli territories nor use the Ben Gurion airport.

Other important economic consequences of the occupation and political uncertainties regarding the conflict have to do with tourism and foreign investment. Leila Asfoura affirms that tourism to Bethlehem has decreased in the past years and particularly this year due to the September vote on the recognition of the Palestinian state. Approximately between 100 and 200 Latin Americans of Palestinian background visit Bethlehem every year, but the number has been decreasing as the occupation continues. Also the capacity of investment is reduced because of the uncertainty of the occupation. Any movement by the Israeli army, even if it is not violent, generates mistrust for investors and takes away all of their money.

The property issue is another complex problem under occupation for the communities abroad. Most of the people that have left sell their properties without knowing or caring

who they sell them to. Some of these lands have actually been purchased by Israelis and turned into settlements. Also land confiscation is common, as many of the people who left because of the wars could not claim their properties, so the Israeli government expropriated them. Legally, the property titles of the Ottoman, British, Jordanian and Israeli periods are valid without any problem to demonstrate the ownership of land, but because of the Ottoman Empire's high taxes on properties, many families declared less extensions of land than they actually had, so till now, under those property titles the land is confiscated. The separation wall also represents land loss. Until this moment, a family from Beit Jala who moved to Honduras and came back have a case in the Israeli Supreme Court of Justice because of land confiscation.

Particular Characteristics of the Communities per Country

Even though most of the communities in Latin American countries follow the same patterns in terms of establishment and history, most of them have adapted and evolved in different ways depending on the country where they arrived, creating different kinds of organizations or social institutions according to the different realities of each country. In this section of the report we will assess some of the countries with the larger and more organized communities in Latin America, which are Chile, Honduras, El Salvador, Peru, Nicaragua, Brazil, Colombia and Argentina. Other countries like Venezuela, México, Bolivia, Guatemala and Ecuador also have Palestinian communities, but we decided not to include them. This does not mean that these communities are less important or are not as active as the other ones, but they share very similar situations as the countries mentioned, so for the effects of this report we decided to omit them.

Chile

Chile is the Latin American country with the closest relation to Palestine and to the Bethlehem district, as it counts with the largest and most organized concentration of Palestinian population outside of the Arab countries. According to the Chilean-Palestinian Information Office, which is the official diffusion organ of the Palestinian Federation of Chile, it is estimated that there are between 100,000 and 300,000 people of Palestinian origin living in the country. The total population in Chile is 16,888,760. In proportion to the general population, Palestinians do not represent a very significant percentage of the population, composing less than 1.8% of Chile's inhabitants. Nevertheless, this community has offered important contributions to the development of the country and has a strong influence on its politics and economy.

The first migration wave arrived in Chile in the 1890s and established around the city of Santiago, settling in the neighborhood that later would be called Patronato. The migrants were mainly young single males that left because of the military service and the hardships of the Ottoman rule, as well as the religious discrimination in Palestine. Most of them were Christians from the cities of Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour and started working as peddlers. However, through time they started developing their own businesses and industries in the country, such as textiles. It is important to mention that the Chilean government encouraged European migration at that time, giving groups of settlers land and concessions, whilst Arab migration was not really desired.

At first this population was subject to discrimination and social rejection, which made their integration to Chilean society more complex. By the 1940s, Palestinian society in Chile grew into a wealthy middle class with a new generation that were able to receive a good education and become successful

professionals. Nowadays, some of the biggest fortunes in Chile belong to people of Palestinian origin.

A second migration wave arrived to Chile in 1948 as a result of the Nakba and the war against Israel. This migration process was easier, as many of the Palestinians already had relatives living in Chile, which provided them with work and a place to live. Another migration wave came in 1967 because of the Six days war and was received into a familiar environment as well.

The larger Palestinian communities in Chile live in the Patronato neighborhood in Santiago and in the cities of Talca, Vi. a del Mar, Valpara. so, La Calera, Quillota, Cabildo and Linares. The migration flow nowadays is not as accentuated as it was in the past century.

According to Xavier Abu Eid, the Communications Advisor for the Negotiations Affairs Department of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), only two or three families approximately a year leave Palestine to Chile. On the other side, most of the families are not coming back, as they already have a well-established lifestyle in Chile, so they mostly return for holidays to visit relatives or to remember their place of origin. One example is Bshara Ishjara, who left Bethlehem as an eight year old child in 1953 to Chile because of the war and just returned this year as a tourist to visit his hometown.

Social and Civil Institutions: Keeping the Identity Alive.

Since the first arrival of Palestinians in Chile, this community has created certain institutions and clubs that have helped to keep their identity, culture and connection with their region of origin alive. The first founded collective institutions were related to the preservation of faith and religion. In 1917 the first Geek Orthodox Church, Saint George's Church, was built and became the first meeting point for the Palestinians. Even

now, the church is an important center for conserving identity. The Orthodox Church in Chile has six parishes and responds to the patriarchate of Antioquia, though most of the priests and bishops are originally from Beit Jala. As the Orthodox Church didn't develop enough in Chile, many Palestinians who were originally orthodox became catholic and assimilated to their local churches.

The Arab press in Chile was also an essential factor to keep the community together. From 1910 to 1948 there were 24 Arab newspapers edited in the country, some of them with the main purpose of preserving the church and the sense of community around it. The most important Palestinian publication in Chile is the Al Damir magazine, which is printed by the Bethlehem 2000 Foundation in Spanish, and includes several articles about the community in Chile and their relation with Palestine, projects of cooperation, and events related to both societies.

The Palestinian Club is also a social institution of great value for the Chilean-Palestinians. It was founded in 1938 by Nicolás Yarur, Plácido Musalem, Salomón Ahues, Jacob Zagmutt, Saleh Junis, Bichara Thumala, Emilio Deik, Guillermo Cumsille and Sabas Chahuan. Since then it has become the largest private club in Santiago de Chile, with facilities for sports, arts and culture. Although it is considered a point of encounter for Palestinian families to maintain the traditions and the identity of Palestine, in the CIVITAS Report on the Palestinian Diaspora it is argued that the club's exclusivity, lack of cultural activities and fear of facing political issues are limiting the possibilities of this institution as a meeting point for the community.

The Palestino Sports Club was founded in 1920 as a professional football soccer team and now is one of the most acclaimed teams in the Chilean soccer league. Initially the team

was integrated only by Arab members but through time it was opened up for Chilean and international players without modifying the original identity of the club. The team is now in the first division and has won two national tournaments.

Bethlehem 2000 Foundation started working officially on July 31st, 2001 with the purpose of committing to the development of the community in the Bethlehem area as a way of giving back something to the homeland of their ancestors, showing solidarity towards the Palestinians and to make communication channels with the actual Palestinian society. The foundation was created by the well-known businessmen José Said, Alberto Kassis and Mario Nazal and mainly focuses on projects related with education, youth and children, and culture promotion. Also they develop permanent social programs and give humanitarian aid, as well as collaboration with other Palestinian and Chilean organizations. Their work is mainly covered and promoted by Al Damir magazine, which has already 83 numbers issued and can be accessed for free through the organization's website.

The General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS) is the most important youth organization of Chilean-Palestinians. This organization is politically active and focuses on the liberation of Palestine by diffusing information about the situation and other different means. The Union is formed by high school and university students of all the Palestinian Diaspora. The GUPS-Chile started functioning during the 80's but was disarticulated due to the disappointment of the Oslo agreement in 1993. In the year 2000 the Union was structured again and, till now they share their political view and develop different actions for the sake of the Palestinian cause.

The Palestinian Federation of Chile is the political representative of the Chilean-Palestinian collective before the national authorities, other national organizations, the PLO and

the Palestinian National Authority. It promotes the defense of human rights and of international law, especially in the Palestinian case. The federation is composed of several social, political, religious, cultural and humanitarian organizations that share the same values and principles as the Federation and promote their main objectives. The actual president of the Federation is Mauricio Abu Ghosh, and the directory is elected every two years by members of the community.

Politics and the Chilean-Palestinian Community

Since the Palestinian community started getting professional education and became successful businessmen, they also started to get involved in politics. Through different political movements, the Palestinian community in Chile has always been very politically active in contrast with the communities in other parts of Latin America. According to Xavier Abu Eid, in 1947 the Chilean government strongly supported the partition plan and was going to vote in favor of it in the General Assembly of the United Nations, but a debate organized by the first generation of Palestinian students lead by Alejandro Hales created pressure in the government and achieved such that Chile finally abstained from voting on the partition. This is just an example of the political achievement that this collective has obtained over time.

Palestinians also began to get involved in political parties such as the Palestinian Communist Party and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which were repressed in the late 60s but represent the permanent interest of the Palestinian community to make their voice heard and to be present in national and international affairs. According to the Chilean Ambassador in Ramallah, Jorge Ossa, ten percent of the Chilean parliament is composed of people of Palestinian origin, representing several political backgrounds and positions.

In terms of foreign affairs, the relations between the Chilean government and the Palestinian National Authority have always been relatively close due to the connection that the communities have with each other. Chile was the first Latin American country to have diplomatic representation in Ramallah, now an embassy, and to accept a Palestinian embassy on its territory in the year of 1997. In the last two years the relationship has grown even closer with the recognition of the Palestinian State under the borders of 1967.

Ambassador Ossa considers that the Chilean president Sebastián Piñera made crucial efforts to get the consensus for the recognition of the state, although the political pressure of the Chilean Palestinian community according to Xavier Abu Eid was disappointing compared with the Jewish community, which “competed” with a much larger collective with much more history in the country.

The political relation became even closer with the state visit of president Piñera to Palestine in March this year, being the first Chilean president to visit the occupied territories. It is important to mention that on his visit to the city of Beit Jala, approximately three hundred people with some relation to Chile welcomed him in Chile Square, which is an example of the tight connections that are still kept between Beit Jala and the South American country.

On a high political level though, the Palestinian cause is not so prominent. According to Bshara Ishjara, this is a minimal concern for the regular people as they are more worried about other political issues and international affairs closer to Chile. Ignorance and lack of diffusion of the problems in Palestine make Chilean people, even of Palestinian background, somehow indifferent to the occupation and its consequences.

There are also important cooperation programs going on between Chile and the district of Bethlehem. Ambassador Ossa

proudly speaks about a project managed in collaboration with the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and The John Paul II Foundation in which Chile sends doctors to operate on children in the Benedict XVI hospital in Bethlehem. Doctors are sent three or four times a year and till now have performed more than 400 cases of surgery free of charge.

Beit Jala: A Small Part of Chile in Palestine.

In no other place in the West Bank is it possible to see all the love and appreciation that the Palestinians have for Chile and the tight bond between the two communities.

Most of the people in Beit Jala claim to have at least one relative or friend that has gone to live in Chile. It is commonly said by the locals that there is more people of Beit Jala in Chile than in Beit Jala itself and this is reflected on the streets with multiple references to this “brother country”. A square dedicated to this country is situated just in the heart of the city, with a monument commemorating the 200 anniversary of Chile’s independence.

Honduras

Mrs. Leila Larach in her home in Beit Jala. A painting of a Quetzal shows her ties to Honduras and the vase with flowers next to her, is actually a rocket from the time of the second intifada.

As we have mentioned before, statistics are very hard to come by, but it is general knowledge that there are between 150,000 and 200,000 persons of Palestinian descent in Honduras. It is the second largest concentration of Palestinians

in the American Continent. Honduras received its first Palestinian emigrants in 1893; families that went searching for new job opportunities traveled around finally settling down and founding businesses in Honduras. Most of these emigrants came from Beit Jala although a few from Bethlehem and Beit Sahour also established around the Arabs are approximately three percent of the population of the country northern regions of la Ceiba and Tegucigalpa. Nowadays, most families are concentrated in the city of San Pedro Sula, because it is the capital of the industrial activities.

Palestinians lead very important parts of the economy in Honduras. Juan Canahuati, originally from Bethlehem, owns a very significant percentage of the textile industry. Another example is Oscar Kafati, an important member of the coffee sector. Both commercial activities are central to the Honduran economy.

Mrs. Linda Abu Awad still speaks very good Spanish, even though she left Honduras while she was still very young. This demonstrates how the ties between the two regions remain strong.

The political scene has been very hard for Palestinians to enter into since no people other of criollo origin were accepted. However there have been some cases of important political representation, such as Vice-president William Nadal, 6 congressmen from the National Assembly and former president Carlos Flores Facusse, whose mother was born in Bethlehem.

Like Mrs. Leila Larach, a first generation Palestinian now living in Honduras commented in an interview, the only trilingual school of Central America was founded by people from Beit Jala in the city of San Pedro Sula. This school is called San Juan Bautista and teaches English, Arab and Spanish to approximately 155 students.

Mrs. Linda Abu Awad, a house mother who once lived in Honduras, said that some surnames that no longer exist in the Bethlehem district still continue in Honduras. Surnames such as Moussa, Canahuati, Mitri, Kafati and Bendeck, Larach and Segev are common place in Honduras.

The business dynamics between members of the community, are very simple: members of the community help each other start a business or find a job, even if they are not immediate family, like for example, Mr. Riad Farid, owner of Caché store in Beit Jala, who started his business with a loan of 150 USD from a member of the community in Honduras. This direct help is what has helped most Palestinian communities in Latin America thrive.

Founded in 1968 the Centro Social. rabe- Hondure. o, represents an investment of more than US\$ 15 million. Approximately 1,600 Palestinian families attend this center and pay a fee of US\$ 4,000 to enter and US\$ 65 as a monthly quota. However the activities of this club do not accentuate the origin of the community or have educational programs to inform its members about the current situation inside Palestine. Fomenting discussions and lectures to inform the members of this club would be very helpful for the Palestinian plight.

Dr. Issa Kher, who studied in Honduras and Argentina, explained how his generation used to leave to Latin America in order to be able to complete their studies. He himself studied in Honduras and Argentina, and now has a dermatology practice in the center of Bethlehem. However, most of the people who leave Palestine in order to complete their studies, tend to stay and develop their careers in the new country.

Since 2008, because of the attempts of Manuel Zelaya to change the constitution in order to lengthen his time in power and the later election of Porfirio Lobo, the world has perceived

Honduras as a corrupt country, a fact that directly affects the lives of many Palestinians/ Hondurans.

Therefore, Honduran Palestinians cannot get involved in the Palestinian plight as much as they wish because they are more preoccupied with the internal problems of Honduras.

The Larach family has lived in Honduras for three generations; and their ties to Palestine are very strong.

Elias Tanas, a restaurant owner in Bethlehem, explained to us that life in Honduras is no longer as safe and as promising as it once was. The security situation in Honduras is reaching critical points, affecting directly the life of the Palestinian communities established there. Many families, like Elias, are thinking of returning to their original towns, where they still have land and properties in order to avoid the many kidnappings and robberies that are happening in Honduras.

Peru

The migration of Palestinians to Peru started during the second half of the XIX century.

With the Spanish migration, came many Arabs converts to Christianity. The first arrivals were not in Lima, but to the Southern Sierra villages, later on to settle in Lima. The families traveled from village to village on top of a mule, buying and selling merchandize. They established themselves in the high Andean communities, learning Quechua languages even before Spanish. Some family names like Abugatt. s and Abuid settled first in the Mollendo area. Their religion helped them integrate, although their rite was Greek Orthodox instead of Catholic, in

Peru they started to baptize their children through the Catholic rite.

Samira de Abusada, a lady who has lived in Peru since she was 15 years old, still has a summer house in Beit Jala, an example of the many Palestinian families that have built a life in Latin America, but come back to enjoy their hometown. She has now lived 55 years in Peru, where she has 9 children.

She talks about how, after 1956 the most well-off families traveled to Beirut, hoping to return after a few months but ended up staying a while longer. Samira's family was a different story. Her father decided to travel to Peru, where he had a brother and where the

Palestinians were very well received. They felt sheltered, and did not suffer from racism in the way it happened in other Latin American countries. She says "Peru is a blessed country".

Nowadays, approximately six thousand people of Palestinian origin live in Peru, most of them originally from Beit Jala, others from Bethlehem. Many Peruvian families, like Samira's family, have tried to start investing in Palestinian territory. However, the bureaucratic obstacles are too many and some families are giving up on the enterprise.

They are a community with a certain level of awareness but still not as organized or active as those in Chile.

The presence of the Palestinian communities was a determinant factor in the recognition of the Palestinian State by the Peruvian government. The announcement of this recognition was made in Lima on 14th February this year, by the Chancellor José Antonio Garc. a Bela. nde. There existed hope that there would be a unanimous recognition of Latin-American countries through UNASUR however, the recognition has been slow and fragmented.

Columbia

Palestinian migration to Colombia followed the same pattern as elsewhere in Latin America with the first family arriving in 1880. Colombia was not as attractive for migrants as Chile, Brazil or Argentina, so relatively few people arrived there in comparison with the other countries. Unlike Chile and Honduras, the Palestinian collective in Colombia is not the largest Arab community in the country, as most of the migration arrived from Lebanon. In 1937, the Colombian government put restrictions on immigration, particularly coming from Arab countries, ending with the important migratory waves from Palestine to Colombia.

The Atlantic coast of Colombia was the place where these groups established and developed, especially in the cities of Barranquilla, Santa Maria, Cartagena, Maicao and San Andrés. Like in most of Latin America, people were originally from the cities of Bethlehem and Beit Jala and were orthodox Christians, although in the 1970s a new wave of Muslim Palestinians migrated to the municipality of Maicao. The Palestinian Christians adapted to local catholic churches, so the presence of the Orthodox Church in Colombia is not very important.

The first generation was dedicated to commerce and started to open their own shops in their neighborhoods. Soon they expanded and got involved in the industry by opening factories, especially with textiles. The Jaar family owns what is till now the second most important textile plant in Barranquilla, Textiles Saturno. The new generations have developed their economic activities mainly in the hotel and hospitality business.

At the time being, it is estimated that there are more than 3,000 people related to Palestine living in Colombia, mostly

living in Barranquilla. About 100 live in Bogot. And they join sporadically for social events or for political activity, but they are not as well organized as the Chilean groups. The spokesman for the Colombian Palestinian community at the moment is Ali Nofal. Examples of the mobilizations of this community were the protests in front of the Israeli embassy in 2009 because of the attacks on the Gaza strip, demanding the government to break diplomatic relations with Israel.

Laila Asfoura is the executive director of Laila Tours, a travel agency established in Bethlehem that organizes tours around the Holy Land and the Bethlehem area. She is originally from Bethlehem but moved with her husband to Colombia during the first intifada because of the violence and lived there for eleven years. According to Laila, the family connections are the main factor that keeps the communities in touch and people coming back, but as the first generations die, the contact gets lost. Families make their life in Colombia, have well established businesses and do not have real incentives to return to their place of origin besides the love for their homeland.

Also, many young people with relatives in Colombia want to leave Palestine because of the unemployment situation and the lack of opportunities. Laila also affirms that less than 8% of the people who leave for Colombia actually come back.

Colombia and the Recognition of the Palestinian State

Colombia is one of the few Latin American countries that have not recognized the state of Palestine. The official position of the government in this matter is that they will follow the steps of the UN and they will only recognize the state if there is a peace agreement with the state of Israel, so it is not likely that Palestine has the Colombian support on the UN General

Assembly in September. The Jewish News Agency declared that there is a compromise between Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and the World Jewish congress not to recognize a Palestinian state.

There are some solidarity groups that support the Palestinian cause in Colombia, like the National Committee of Solidarity with Palestine or the Union of Internationalists with Palestine but they are not strong enough to influence the foreign policy, which is focused on their strategic relations with the United States of America. These relations make the Colombian government more cautious about their approach towards the conflict and therefore more reluctant to recognize the state until the U. S. makes a move in this matter.

Brazil

The Brazilian-Palestinian community is significantly large and has strong bonds with its regions of origin. Although the use of Portuguese makes them different to the Spanish speaking communities, most of the Palestinians in Brazil have followed processes that are very similar to the rest. Ligia Maria Scherer, the Brazilian Ambassador in Ramallah, estimates that there are approximately 60,000 people of Palestinian origin living in Brazil and 4,000 Brazilian-Palestinians living in the West Bank. The first migration wave started in the XIX century like the rest of Latin America with Palestinian Christians from the Bethlehem district. There was a second wave as a consequence of the Nakba and a third one related to the 1967 war. In contrast with the other Latin American countries, the second and third migratory waves to Brazil were from Muslim Palestinians of the region around Ramallah.

The Christian Palestinians from Bethlehem established themselves on the northeast of Brazil in the cities of Recife and Natal. The main concentration of Palestinians in the country is in the state of Rio Grande do Sul though there is also an important community in the capital city of the Amazonas state, Manaus. Most of the Palestinian collective in Brazil is Muslim, differentiating from the rest of the subcontinent.

The economic situation of the Palestinians in Brazil is favorable. Even though the Brazilian collective did not achieve the wealth or the fortunes that were built by Palestinian families in countries like Chile or Honduras, they compose a stable middle class that is dedicated to commerce and professional activities.

In addition to the community, Brazil received 117 Palestinian refugees as a request from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2009. These people have had some trouble adapting to life in Brazil but were helped by the Arab Palestinian-Brazilian Federation (FEPAL) and the UNHCR to get employment and integrate into the Brazilian society.

It is important to mention that the Palestinian-Brazilian flow is constant, according to the Brazilian Ambassador in the West Bank. People come back and forth from both sides, return to Palestine to get married with Palestinians and visit relatives, so the communication is probably one of the closest of the Palestinian communities in Latin America. An example of solidarity and cooperation between the two societies is the construction of a school in the surroundings of Ramallah by members of the community of Santa Catarina.

Organizations of Palestinians in Brazil

The Arab Palestinian-Brazilian Federation (FEPAL) is the civil society organization that legitimately represents the Brazilian-

Palestinian collective before the Brazilian government politically. It was founded in November 1980 and it is characterized for being a democratic organization, with all of its directives elected in a very transparent way.

According to Elayyan Aladdin, current President of the Federation, this organization represents exclusively the interests of the Palestinian community in Brazil, independently of other Palestinian collectives in the world and of the problems in the occupied territories.

There is a tight relationship between the Federation and the Palestinian Embassy in Brazil, but it mainly focuses on the connection between the communities and families and not on political issues.

Ambassador Scherer affirms that the FEPAL manifests its positions towards Brazilian foreign policy, but they cannot be considered a “lobby”. The FEPAL is concerned mostly with the internal situation of the communities in Brazil and on the political internal issues of the country. The Federation’s role is also preserving the Palestinian identity and culture in Brazil and makes efforts to rescue the history of Palestinians in Brazil and its evolution to the actual communities.

The Comitê Brasileiro de Interesse Nacional Palestino is an NGO created with the purpose of building a relationship between the Brazilian government and the Palestinian National Authority to help establish a Palestinian independent state. Unlike the FEPAL, the main focus of this organization is to create projects at an international level to end the occupation. The Executive Director of this committee, Husam Bajis, considers it essential to involve the Palestinian communities of Brazil in the process of assessing the conflict by Brazilian authorities.

Brazil's Official Relations with Palestine

The highlight of the relations between Brazil and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) was the recognition of the Palestinian State inside of the 1967 borders. This was negotiated through a letter sent to Luiz In. cio Lula da Silva, ex-president of Brazil, by Mahmoud Abbas, president of the PNA. The agreement was made at a very high level so the Palestinian community did not have any influence on the decision, but was pleased with the result. This has very important international implications because of Brazil's position as an emerging world power and as a regional leader.

According to the statement by which the Brazilian government recognized the Palestinian State, Brazil has a very close relation with the PLO and the PNA, establishing a diplomatic representation in Ramallah since 2004 and with state visits from both presidents to their respective countries. The Brazilian government also cooperates with the World Bank and other international agencies in projects for development in the West Bank and has donated generous amounts of money to the PNA.

El Salvador

The migration to El Salvador has significantly diminished in the last years. It appears that the presence of Arabs in general was not as openly accepted as with other migrations. For example, The Club Arabe did not start out with such a name but rather as Club Social El Prado, a name that hid the real identity of the organization. The community in El Salvador suffered a certain level of rejection that other communities did not suffer.

Although it is hard to give specific numbers, if one takes into account the surnames, the people of Palestinian origin oscillates between 50,000 and 60,000, making El Salvador the third country with the most Palestinian presence.

Due to legal restrictions of entry during the 30s, the Christians stopped arriving, so the majority of the Palestinians established in El Salvador were Muslim. Due to the lack of following, education and places to worship, Islam was lost. The children were sent to a catholic school, marriage happened with catholic women therefore bringing about a diminishment of Islam.

There are many Palestinian organizations that work directly with the grassroots in El Salvador. For example the Sociedad Benéfica Femenina . rabe, which attends to families of low income, especially children. Another example is the construction of the Villa Palestina, which houses 163 families and grants them basic services such as education, health clinics and a Church. The Centro Islamico. rabe-Salvadore. o, is a coordinator of cultural activities, which defend the history of the Palestinian communities in El Salvador, and writes supplements such as a magazine, internet webpage and TV programs. The Asociaci. n Salvadore. a Palestina, (ASP) takes care of the security of the community of Palestinian origin, whenever “their dignity is lessened; making sure that the state policies don’t prejudice the legacy of the Palestinian ancestors, and that they have the equality they deserve by law.

One of the most interesting organizations is the Comité de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Palestino which empathizes with the need for freedom and peace of the Palestinian people.

This organization has built two plazas at the municipal terrain, including Plaza Palestine and the Plaza Yasser Arafat.

The community in El Salvador is one of the most politically active in Latin America, and they have a strong community outreach. However, their approach to the Palestinian plight is very cautious, and they do not make any strong statements. It is important to note that the relationship between the Jewish and Palestinian community is very close because of economic ties.

Argentina

The arrival of the Palestinian families into Argentina was through the port of Buenos Aires and although the first communities were established around the city, the main flow continued onto the Central Region of Chile, crossing the Andes. The reason for this was the belief that there were more jobs available in Chile than everywhere else.

In Argentina, like other regions in Latin America, there existed a tendency to group a stereotype people of Palestinian decent into the Arab group. Still nowadays the migrant legislation in Argentina does not foment the arrival of new Palestinians. Argentinean policies are especially selective; they are afraid of any migration that would “Affect the homogeneity of the race”. The recent economic crisis has caused further restrictions, for fear of losing employment and business opportunities.

Even though the Palestinian community in Argentina is smaller than others, according to Xavier Abu Eid, it is still one of the most active politically. The intellectual community has a high level of connection and association with the Palestinian community in Chile which strengthens the actions of this Palestinian presence. Many solidarity programs have been created such as the Misi. n Palestina, the Congreso Nacional en

la Comisi. n de Solidaridad and Derribando Muros de la Radio with the Mother of the Plaza de Mayo.

Nicaragua: The Palestinians and the Sandinista Front

The first generation of Palestinians arrived in Nicaragua more than a century ago, and summed a total of 200 persons. Three generations have now lived in Nicaragua. The existing community is not as big as the ones in Chile or Honduras, although it has its own particularities which are important to mention. First of all, it is a community that has received explicit support from the Sandinista Front, who has acted as a political front that has empathized deeply with the Palestinian plight. Besides having many Palestinian members, they have supported the recognition of the Palestinian state.

Strengthening the Communities for the Future: What has Been Done and What Should be Done

As it has been described throughout the report, Palestinian Communities in Latin America still have strong connections with the region, but an important concern is what can be done to keep these connections from eroding and how to take advantage of them to face the everyday challenges of the Palestinian people. Generations pass and people abroad feel less related to the land of their ancestors, losing aspects of the culture and traditions, and completely assimilating to the Latin American way of life.

Language is a barrier that makes the distances longer between Bethlehem and Latin America. After the first two generations, people of Palestinian origin start to lose the Arabic language, which is an essential part of their identity and culture. Some efforts have been made to keep the Arabic

language in the communities abroad, such as trilingual schools and Arabic lessons in the Palestinian social clubs, but their range is very limited considering the size of the collectives. Ambassador Ossa of Chile declared that shamefully many diplomats of Palestinian background do not speak Arabic, which represents a political limitation that has to be addressed.

Sending Arabic professors to the different countries or bringing groups of people to learn the language can soften this barrier and represent a more direct approach between the people and their culture. The Palestine International Institute (PII) in collaboration with the University of Jordan is now offering scholarships for young people of Palestinian or Jordanian origin to study Arabic in Amman for the summer with all the accommodation and basic expenses covered. This is good example of how the bonds can be tightened between the communities.

Spanish language can be also an important tool to keep the groups in touch. It is regrettable that having so many people related to Palestine in Spanish speaking countries, there is not an official information service translated into Spanish of the PLO and the PNA. Xavier Abu Eid mentions a successful project in which thirteen Palestinian youths were sent to the Diplomatic Academy of Madrid for two years to learn Spanish and diplomacy. The purpose of this program was to send these young people as diplomats to Latin American countries and to show a new face of Palestine which is more accurate to the actual reality. A second part of the project is already planned where Latin American Palestinians will be selected to specialize as Palestinian diplomats for Spanish speaking countries. This type of project refreshes the relations because of the working with young people of both sides who have new ideas and mentalities and, in some years will be the decision makers in their respective communities.

The government and the civil society have to make a bigger effort to create networks with the Latin American countries through the Palestinian communities. There is neither a defined policy from the government towards the Diaspora in Latin America nor a serious cultural policy to strengthen the exchanges between the two societies. The Palestinian National Council, even with representatives from Latin America, has been very inactive in promoting a closer relationship. It is necessary that NGOs and Federations from Palestinian communities put pressure on these organizations to have official policies that can help better communication and collaboration between the societies and the governments. These approaches can generate important benefits such as more foreign investment, tourism, academic and scientific exchanges and even political support.

A way of bringing awareness to the people abroad about the situation in Palestine and their responsibilities to their brothers here is to bring them to visit the region and to stay with local people for a relatively extended amount of time. This will give a sense of compromise towards the people here and the difficulties they face every day, so the communities may commit to a more active role in the Palestinian cause and diffuse what is going on here in their countries.

Academic exchanges are also a good strategy for keeping the Diaspora together. Institutions like the Bethlehem University can do a lot in this matter by making agreements with different universities across Latin America for periodic exchange programs, scholarships or courses which can promote the flow of knowledge and academic work to broaden the vision about Palestine elsewhere. Internships with local organizations or institutions are also a good resource to generate interest in Palestinian Latin Americans about their region of origin and also to giveback something to the land of their ancestors.

More studies about these communities have to be done. Governments of the Latin American countries and the Palestinian National Authority have to consider in their statistic information and their census these communities and also make a more serious attempt to update the data about their current situation. This is important for the authorities to address the collectives and the policies towards them in a more effective way.

Conclusions

This report is only a general assessment on the Latin American communities in Palestine.

More work has to be done to study the relations and interactions between these communities, but this report can give a broad overview about the present situation. One of the main objectives of this report is to invite governments, organizations and academic institutions to write more about the subject and to generate reliable information that can be used to help the Palestinian people and strengthen the connections with people abroad.

As we have observed, there is a high level of interconnection between Palestinian communities inside Latin America. This connection should be taken one step further by organizations, clubs and institutions who reach out to other communities inside Latin America, in order to fortify and present a unified lobby that can have an effective weight in any decision making process regarding policies towards Israel and Palestine.

On the other hand, informing the community about the current situation in Palestine could be decisive, since many

members of the social clubs would pay to know about the situation. Preserving Spanish language as a language used by Arab speakers can help unify this lobby.

The relations of the communities are mostly familiar, so the main challenge for this collective is to go beyond the family ties and keep the solidarity towards their region of origin. There are some organizations and federations that are trying to do so, but more efforts have to be done to keep the identity together and to take advantage of the cultural links.

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