



*Research is to see what everybody else has seen
and to think what nobody else has thought.
-Albert Szent-Györgyi*



Exploring Middle Eastern Immigration:
History and Contemporary Diaspora of Middle Eastern
Immigrants to Latin America and Culinary Practices
Influenced by Their Culture

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the flow of Middle Eastern immigrants to Latin America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and how the Porfirio Diaz prosperity era became a pull factor that drew millions from Middle Eastern countries to South America, specifically Mexico. The presence of Arab culture, language, habits, customs, and foods in countries like Mexico, Veracruz, Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia left a long lasting impression which is still present to this day. Their successful settlement was possible by the development of centers and associations in Mexico which created an interconnected system that enabled immigrants to meet with people from the same background, making their transition smoother. Their impact was evident in the creation of new food practices that embraced both Mexican and Arab influences and created a new platform for savory fusions.



The continuous flow of global immigration is as a testament of individuals pursuing a life away from home. Reasons vary, but one aspect remains certain; immigration is caused by factors that push people and families to move away and start a new life where they believe their living conditions will be improved. Migrating to a distant country has its own set of challenges and complications but immigration often escalates to the need to migrate to another continent. Emigration is so painful that there must be extreme reasons for doing it, like hunger, political persecution, oppression or war. People who travel across oceans and feel the need to leave everything and everyone behind, do so courageously and, surely, with optimism and hopes of a better life and a change in their adverse circumstances. Such is the case of Middle Eastern immigrants in Latin America. The history of their migration to the Americas, diaspora, experience, and how their cuisine inspired a new vision of food in Latin America will serve as an excellent vessel to present a general perception of Middle Eastern immigration to the south of the border.

It is important to specify the geographical origin of the Middle Eastern people to make clear connections and understand how these factors affected but also helped create a safe, familiar environment for the ones who migrated to various Latin American destinations. The Middle East is currently composed of fifteen countries. Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain are home to more than three hundred million individuals. Of these, Egypt is the most populated with more than eighty-eight million people while Bahrain is the smallest with just over one million inhabitants (Teach Mid East 2017). Initially, the expression “Middle Easterner”



alluded to the people that possessed the northern and focal parts of the Arabian Peninsula. The most common languages spoken in the area are Arabic, Persian (Farsi), Hebrew, Turkish with other minority dialects spoken as well. “The status of a language as a majority or minority one is fluid in the Middle East, depending on the situation of the language concerned and the attitude of its speakers. Thus, while Arabic is the majority language in the Middle East, it is a minority language in Turkey” (Suleiman 2004, 25). Furthermore, many major religions originated in this region including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam being the most widely practiced religion. Practice religions vary by country. For instance, over 40% of Lebanese people practice Christianity (World Population Review 2017).

It is extremely important to mention that, in theory, it would have been easier for Middle Eastern immigrants to land in an European country, closer to their country of origin to keep a tight bond with their respective communities and families and avoid making the transatlantic travel which could have been proven perilous given the circumstances of their travel accommodations. This is said taking into consideration the understanding of a stronger capitalist society in México and the promotion of foreign investments in the country. This factor caused a greater development and a great economic prosperity during the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship which seemed attractive to immigrants. “Up until the first decade of the twentieth century, the Mexican laws did not impose great restrictions to the entry of foreigners into the country; therefore, many Arabs of Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian descent were favored by the situation” (García Ita, 2005, 107).



Immigration from the Middle East to Latin America began to escalate at the end of the eighteenth century and all throughout the nineteenth century. According to the Arab American Institute ¹ “Latin America has the largest Arab population outside of the Middle East and is home to anywhere from seventeen to thirty million people of Arab descent. That is more than any other diaspora region in the world” (Saliba, 2016). A great number of Arabs migrated to Latin America, specifically México, from Lebanon, after the devastating collapse of its thread commerce following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 which facilitated the trade between European industries and other competitors. “Mexico in particular was a destination point because of established immigration networks and the ability to circumvent U.S officials along the Eastern Sea Board by travelling first through Mexico” (Alfaro-Velcamp 2007, 46). The uncertainty of the exact number of Arabs in Mexico is due to an incalculable number of Mexicans who ignored that their elder relatives were of Middle Eastern descent because of immigrants taking Hispanicized names to avoid the possible presence of discrimination. All through the migration process there was some restriction to the Arabs, particularly to the Lebanese, who were the majority of the Arab foreigners. “Many Mexicans believed that foreigners who arrived to the country came to occupy positions and to fill jobs that belonged to the Mexicans” (Marín Guzman 2003, 107). That all changed with the gradual inclusion of Middle Easterners to the Mexican setting and market.

México became home to a number of Middle Eastern people very rapidly. Some immigrants did not wish to stay in Mexico but thought of the country as a “passage way” to the United States but Latin America began to rise up before them with its myriad of possibilities.



Although geographically close to the U.S., the tightness of the American immigration laws at the time, forced migrants to stay in México and forge their own way into the country. On the other hand, some immigrants were denied entry to the U.S. due to health problems and decided to continue on to South America while some “boarded the ships thinking they were headed to the U.S., only to end up in Latin America” (Darcy 2006, 24). Others, had México as a first option and started to imprint their presence through their language, history, culture, and customs. In the article “Lebanese Immigration to México and The Americas” published in the magazine *CISEN-UNAM* writer Antonio Trabulse Kaim explains:

In the early twentieth century, thousands of men and women emigrated from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Iraq to Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile and other countries in the hemisphere. The Lebanese came to Mexico at the end of the last century from the United States or by ship at the Mexican ports of Veracruz, Tampico and Progreso. Research has shown that the first Lebanese immigrant who arrived was R.P. Boutros Raffoul in 1878. Three years later Joseph M. Abad arrived, and in 1882, Santiago Saouma Adued settled in Mérida (Trabulse Kaim, 2014, 65)

While Mexico was seen as an ideal place of migration, “Middle Easterners, mainly from Lebanon and Syria, arrived in virtually all Latin American countries, and specially in large numbers in Argentina and Brazil” (Foote and Goebel, 2014, 2). It is believed that about 300,000 people came to the Latin America’s largest nations; Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico in the beginning of the nineteenth century. After their arrival, Arab-speaking immigrants realized that the Latin American government resourcefulness was not ideal to make a smooth transition into their day to day lives as immigrants. The Middle Eastern community then decided to collectively act as a support system and assist each other in the various changes and transitions they would face as immigrants. The majority of those who migrated to Argentina came from the province of



Syria under Ottoman empire.² “Because they came from the Ottoman empire they were given the name *turco* – “Turk” in English—a usually derogatory term still used to this day” (Civantos 2006, 6). The mere use of terms like these forces an idea of discrimination or even racism towards immigrants. It attempts to compress their identity to words that are often used in a negative context. The use of such labels was not exclusive to a country in particular. Mexican, Salvadoran, Chilean, and Argentinian natives, among others, also used the word to refer to someone from the Middle East. Although not considered disrespectful to some, such words promote behaviors that negate the progress and inclusion of migrant communities. “These identifiers ‘turcos’ ... subsume a multiplicity of cultural distinction thereby concealing individual biographies and ethnic identities and heritages” (DeLugan, 2016, 3).

The Middle Eastern diaspora was about the dislocation from its people and their relocation in Latin American countries (Braziel, Evans, and Mannur, 2003). Once Middle Easterners arrived to the Americas, they intended to be productive members of the new adopted society and worked towards the preservation of their culture in hopes that the future generations being born outside of the Middle East would keep their heritage, traditions, language, and religion alive. Naturally, Middle Eastern immigrants were drawn to meet with people of the same origin, others they could identify with and who had experienced similar circumstances. In order to do that, they relied in the foundation of numerous social, religious, and cultural organizations in México and other Latin American countries. Two of these Mexican organizations were the *Sociedad de Jóvenes Libaneses* and *Sociedad de Jóvenes Sirios* which were founded with the purpose of uniting the Lebanese and Syrian immigrants for cultural and religious objectives in



Mérida, Yucatán in 1902. Additionally, the Lebanese community founded the *Logia Masónica Monte Líbano* in 1920 which would later spread to other major provincial cities in the country. In the following years, many more small associations were founded, which reveal the diversity both among the Lebanese and Syrian among the other Arab immigrants in México (Marín Guzman 2003, 96).

Middle Eastern immigrants in 1920 relied on their connections with people who migrated before them to make their transition smoother and to settle in a quicker fashion. Syrian Jews and Christian Lebanese, in general, had at least one relative or acquaintance situated in México. Through the family relationship, the new immigrants gradually incorporated to their new environment. Upon arrival, generally:

Jewish immigrants had at least one person available to help with the migratory procedures and to find their families, if any relatives migrated before them. In regard to Christian immigrants, the relative or known person would help them localize members of their ancient villages or established religious groups throughout the Mexican Republic (Rein, Cano, and Molina 2012, 82).

Lebanese immigrants first arrived to Veracruz, México in 1878, halfway through Porfirio Díaz first presidential period. Throughout the years, they migrated to Puebla, a city that is close to both Veracruz and México City, the capital of México. The closeness between cities proved to be beneficial to the Lebanese involvement in commerce activities. Immigrants started to sell small goods such as pins, belts, combs, and slowly introduced cotton clothing. The ambulatory commerce in the first half of the nineteenth century was in the hands of the nationals, but it gradually started to change once Middle Easterners realized they could introduce new merchandise in the markets. They also worked as intermediaries of urban establishments and



pioneered the *abono* commerce.³ It is very important to mention that most of the Arabs and Lebanese businessmen's first costumers were people from indigenous regions. They felt the need to learn Náhuatl, Mayan, and Spanish in order to properly communicate with their customers (Inclán, 1995, 64). This opened up a whole new area of collaboration where they were able to transmit their knowledge in activities that both, Middle Easterners immigrants and Mexicans, could perform together.

With Middle Eastern migration also came new cuisines and culinary traditions that revolutionized the way food was prepared in Latin America. Many recipes and way of cooking were passed on from generation to generation and still managed to maintain a unique identity among Latin American gastronomic practices. A perfect example of this concept is Colombia. Arab immigrants to this region brought new flavors and the use of new ingredients, strengthening Colombian gastronomy. They introduced traditions like eating more vegetables, onion and garlic seasoning, and how to utilize condiments and spices like pepper. Although the new culinary concept in Colombia was embraced by the nationals, they perceived Middle Eastern condiments and spices to be too strong, forcing the new cuisine to find a balanced fusion between both cuisines, giving Colombians a new experience using the same foods they were accustomed to eat (Bohorquez, 2016, 1).

Another accepted adaptation of Middle Eastern cuisine were the *kepes*. These were primarily made with lamb meat in the Middle East, but this type of meat was not easy to find in México after first wave of immigrants. Instead of lamb they started using beef as a substitute which proved to be extremely successful among Mexican locals. Different variations came from



this adaptation such as fish and veal *kepes* which are still consumed in central México to this day.

The new cuisine brought by Middle Easterners was centralized in the use of many condiments, leaves, and spices that were not normally consumed in the Americas. As Mexican gourmet chef Susan Carolina Garduño Morales mentions in the article “Sabores del mundo: la cocina árabe”:

Arab cuisine was primarily based on the use of pinions, nuts, almonds, curry, mint, thyme, oregano, saffron, turmeric, parsley, and cinnamon. Different kinds of fruits like citrus, figs, dates, peaches, grapes, and dried fruits were also introduced in the new cuisine. Though used in abundance for cooking purposes, the scarcity of such ingredients led to the plantation and cultivation of these for consumption purposes. It also opened up a new market where Middle Easterners could sell them to the Arab and Mexican communities. (Garduño Morales, 2014, 1)

The availability of these new ingredients made other cooking processes possible. A perfect example of this are *tacos al pastor*. This idea originated from Puebla, México and was introduced by Lebanese immigrants. The Lebanese version of *tacos al pastor* is *shawarma*; roast lamb served on flower tortilla, but the Mexican and Lebanese fusion created one of the most popular, and famously recognized foods in México. *Tacos al pastor* although originally made of lamb, evolved to pork to be accepted by Mexican locals since lamb was not a popular meat in Mexican cuisine. Slices of pork are marinated in chiles for at least four hours then stacked into a long *trompo* or spit. As the *trompo* turns, the meat gets crispy on the outside but stays soft and juicy on the outside giving it a unique flavor favored by many. To top it off, the *tacos al pastor* are sprinkled with onions, cilantro, salsa, and a slice of pineapple. These last ingredients are a Mexican adaptation of the dish which proved to be a huge success in flavor (Salazar 2017).



Mexican and Middle Eastern cuisines are widely recognized throughout México. New dishes were created to stay and be embraced by locals on what some categorize as the perfect marriage of spices and flavor.

The Middle Eastern influence in Latin America proved to be powerful and a positive influence in places where diversity is measured by the amount of *mestizaje* an individual possesses. The long journey Middle Easterners traveled accompanied by their expectations were met by people who were willing to learn and embrace their culture. To their benefit, they were also supported by members of their own countries who helped them settle. Furthermore, it is important to note the expansion of their culinary abilities which changed the way many view and practice cuisine. It veered from being exclusive to inclusive in the hopes of leaving a permanent footprint in Latin America which proved to be successful.

Notes

¹Established in 1985 and based in Washington, DC, the Arab American Institute (AAI) is a non-profit, nonpartisan national leadership organization. AAI was created to nurture and encourage the direct participation of Arab Americans in political and civic life in the United States.

² Former Turkish empire that was founded about 1300 by Osman and reached its greatest territorial extent under Suleiman in the 16th century; collapsed after World War I.

³ Method in which small installments are made in order to pay off debt.

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I was born in Mexico City and had the privilege to live there for eleven years. I graduated from Merced Highschool and moved back to Mexico to be closer to my roots and create a closer connection to my home country and language. I obtained a teaching diploma from the Pan-American University Language Center to teach English in Mexico and worked as an elementary, high school, and university English professor for three years. I decided to move back to the United States to be close to my family and to pursue a career as a Spanish professor. I am a proud student at University of California, Merced, obtaining a bachelor's degree in Spanish and a member of the National Collegiate Hispanic Honor Society. Teaching has always been my passion and I thrive on adapting to the needs of bilingual improvement among other students and peers. I recognize the need to honor my native language and all the opportunities this wonderful country has given me.