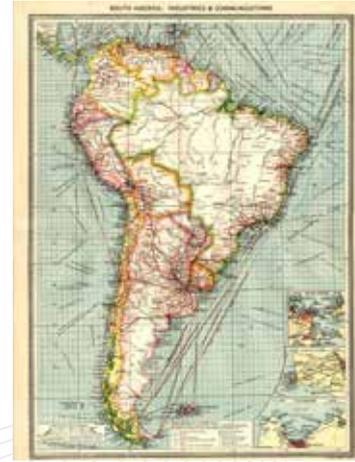




# Palestinian Immigration to Chile



By Ricardo Marzuca Butto



Antique Map, South America Railways Marine, Steam Ship Routes, Original, circa 1907. From the book *My Grandfather Khalil, AN IMMIGRANT JOURNEY.*

“turkophobia,” brought about by Orientalism, determined that Europe and the white race were the ideals that the emerging Latin American states aspired to. Suffice it to note the case of Argentina, where a bill to expel Arab-speaking immigrants was discussed in the Congress of the Nation in 1920. The discussion of that bill certainly prompted many Palestinians arriving in Buenos Aires to cross the Andes - the first ones heroically so, on muleback - although they were also to experience discrimination and rejection in Chile.

Palestinians' sense of family and hamule resulted in chain immigration. As the newcomers became economically prosperous, they brought over their relatives to incorporate them into their

was difficult. The first Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese who arrived in Latin America with Ottoman passports were rejected by the

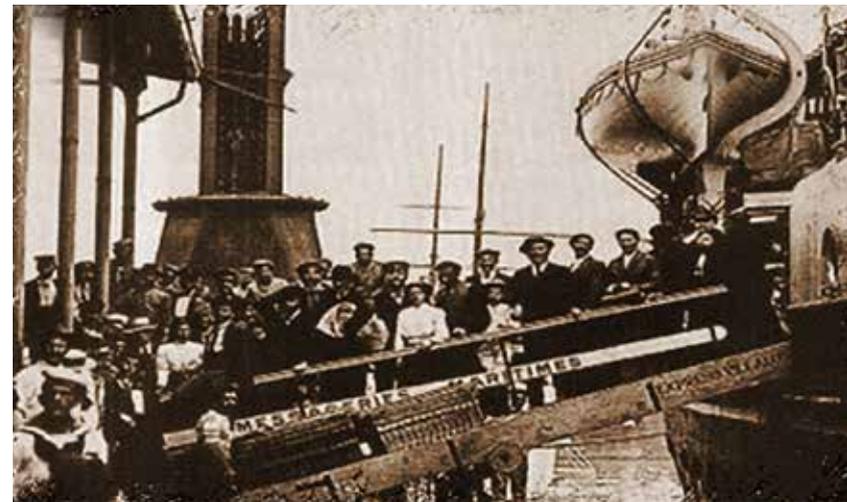
**A**s a result of the economic, social, and political crises concurrent with the fall of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent European colonialism, some six-hundred thousand Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese were forced to leave their homes in search of new opportunities. Many migrated to North America, while many others settled in Latin America. The promise of a better life made the Americas the most valued destination.

It is estimated that between eight thousand and ten thousand Arabs from the Levant region arrived in Chile between 1885 and 1940, dates deemed to delimit the most significant inflow of Arabs to the country. While in the beginning they were Syrians, Palestinians, and Lebanese, with the passing decades, and given the gravity of the situation in Palestine under British rule, and even more so with the Nakba and the Zionist colonization, Palestinians grew in numbers, eventually becoming the largest of these Arab communities as well as the largest Palestinian community outside of the Arab world.

Why to Chile? Several reasons are worth considering.

In countries such as Brazil and Argentina, the vast majority of the more than one-hundred thousand immigrants were Syrians and Lebanese. This led many Palestinians to cross the Andes mountain range in search of new horizons.

One fact that should be borne in mind is that Arabs were not welcomed in the Americas: The road to acceptance and integration



The journey to Chile for the first Palestinian immigrants was not easy. The journey by boat could last up to three months, before passing through Genoa in Italy or Marseille in France. Many of these first immigrants were literally children and did not know the language and culture of the country that would receive them. Many traveled to the port of Buenos Aires and from there to Santiago de Chile crossing the Andes Mountains on mules and donkeys. Photo courtesy of paginasarabes.com.

host communities and were placed at the bottom of the social order, regarded as of inferior and exotic races. In Latin America, the so-called

commercial activities - a fact which contributed to their increased numbers. It should be noted that, when compared with the migrant



View of Santiago, Chile, 1930. From the book *My Grandfather Khalil, AN IMMIGRANT JOURNEY*.

populations arriving from various European countries, the Palestinians in Chile reached the widest spatial distribution throughout the country, mainly due to their engagement in commercial activities. Finally, some immigrants state in their testimonies that the climate in Chile was attractive to them, and many associated it with the climate of Palestine, which made them feel at home. This explains why the Palestinians who settled in Chile were mainly from Beit Jala, Bethlehem, and Beit Sahour.

In response to their rejection by Latin American societies, mainly by the dominant and Europeanized elites, Palestinians resorted to defense mechanisms such as the formation of institutions in different spheres of life, and the creation of the press.

Early on, many social, cultural, political, economic, religious, and sports institutions were created, reflecting the diversity of local,

regional, and national identities in Chile. Among them were: the Orthodox Christian Corporation (1917) reflecting the fact that the majority of Palestinians were Christian Orthodox; the Palestine Sport Club of Santiago (1920), which over the years would become the *Palestino* Sports Club of professional soccer; the Palestine Youth Society of Chile (1924), which attempted to organize all Palestinians in Chile in a “Patriotic Assembly” with the aim of claiming their Palestinian legal citizenship from the British authorities in Palestine, since from the beginning Palestinians in Chile wanted to stay in touch with and remained committed to the struggles of their brothers and sisters in Palestine.

Furthermore, several centers were created that represented the Palestinian and Arab identities - which were seen as complementary to each other - such as the Arab

Society of Curicó (1916), the Palestinian Union Center of Chillán (1916), and the Arab Center of Concepción (1924), among many others throughout the country. Some institutions were created in conjunction with their Syrian brothers, such as the Syrian-Palestinian Commercial Association (1924) and the Syrian-Palestinian Club (1926). One of the most important institutions was the Palestinian Club of Santiago, founded in 1938.

Another element was the creation of the Arab press, headed mainly by Palestinians. The first Arabic newspaper, founded by the Orthodox



Immigrants being transported on a horse-drawn wagon, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1900s. From the book *My Grandfather Khalil, AN IMMIGRANT JOURNEY*.

priest Solomon Jury, was *Al-Murshid* (1912-1917), which sought to preserve the language, culture, and Orthodox religious tenets. Other newspapers emerged in the 1920s, such as *Al-Watan*, founded by Issa Khalil Dacaret, and *El-Sharq*, an initiative by Salomon Ahues. In the 1930s, two newspapers, *La Reforma (Al-Islah)* and *Mundo Arabe*, both founded by Jorge Sabaj Zurob, originally from Beit Jala, were published first in Arabic, then

in bilingual Arabic-Spanish format. Since the late 1940s, *Mundo Arabe* has been published in Spanish only.

The press media played a key role for Palestinians in Chile. They helped build a sense of community, defended them against racist attacks, and emphasized that Palestinians were honest, enterprising, and hardworking. They established relations with governments and the national media; reported on the achievements and successes of individuals, families, and institutions; disseminated events occurring in Palestine and in the Arab world; and organized actions on behalf of the community in defense of their brothers in Palestine. It is crucial to highlight that the media interacted with Arab and Palestinian newspapers, transmitting initiatives, news, and ideas. They thus fostered transnational activity among Palestinian communities in Latin America, which facilitated the creation of a Palestinian national consciousness in the diaspora. Despite the passage of decades, this consciousness has been kept alive to this day.

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