Arab Labor Migration in the Americas, 1880–1930

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Summary and Keywords

Between 1880 and 1924, an estimated half million Arab migrants left the Ottoman Empire to live and work in the Americas. Responding to new economic forces linking the Mediterranean and Atlantic capitalist economies to one another, Arab migrants entered the manufacturing industries of the settler societies they inhabited, including industrial textiles, small-scale commerce (peddling), heavy machining, and migrant services associated with continued immigration from the Middle East. The Ottoman Empire enacted few policies to halt emigration from Syria, Mount Lebanon, and Palestine, instead facilitating a remittance economy that enhanced the emerging cash economies of the Arab world. After 1920, the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon moved to limit new migration to the Americas, working together with increasingly restrictive immigration regimes in the United States, Argentina, and Brazil to halt Arab labor immigration. Using informal archives, the Arab American press, and the records of diasporic mutual aid and philanthropic societies, new research in Arab American migration illustrates how migrants managed a transnational labor economy and confronted challenges presented by American nativism, travel restriction, and interwar deportations.

Keywords: Arab Americans, labor migration, immigration, workers, Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Atlantic world, Ottoman Empire, peddling, textile industry, remittances, 1924 National Origins Act

Between 1880 and 1914, an estimated half million Arab migrants left the Ottoman Empire to live and work in the Americas. Responding to new economic forces linking the Mediterranean and Atlantic capitalist economies to one another in the late 19th century, Arab labor migrants plugged themselves into the urban economies of the settler societies they inhabited. For many, arrival in the Americas represented the final leg of a much longer trajectory. Global processes of proletarianization and labor mobility challenged the peasant economies of the eastern Mediterranean in the 19th century. In Ottoman Syria, Mount Lebanon, and Palestine, peasants engaged in silk production, spinning, and weaving, shifting progressively toward factories established in Levantine cities. The urbanization of Arab labor in the Middle Eastern textile industries ultimately set the stage for emigration abroad. Skilled Arab spinners, weavers, and lace-makers readily found work in
factories in the Americas, and by the 1900s, Levantine companies invested in new factories and contracted migrant labor directly. Secondary service industries swiftly developed to serve newly-arriving Arab workers in Brazil, Argentina, and the United States: boarding houses, credit agencies, grocers, mutual aid societies, wholesalers, and employment agencies offering both skilled and unskilled jobs.

Arab Labor Migration in the Middle East, 1860–1900

New economic forces affecting the 19th-century Ottoman Empire challenged the peasant economies that had defined the region to that point. The demands of industrializing European economies, investment of foreign capital in the Middle East, and the ties between this capital and European colonial power produced a Mediterranean colonial economy wherein Ottoman urban centers produced raw or semi-processed goods for export abroad. For instance, the labor demands of Syrian weaving firms, Mount Lebanese silk manufacturers, and the Egyptian khedivate’s cotton industry altered the work ways of Arab peasants. In the Arab Levant, the wages paid by these textile firms made cash more available than ever, encouraging a progressive proletarianization of labor as well as the movement of Arab workers from rural spaces to urban ones. Increased labor mobility and proletarianization went hand in hand in the Middle East, and wage labor by Arab Ottomans emerged first as a means of supplementing local peasant economies otherwise based on subsistence agriculture. By the end of the 19th century, highly mobile, transnational proletarian economies began to replace local modes of subsistence in Syria and Mount Lebanon.

Waged work emerged, then, as both a feature of the Mediterranean economy and a clever response to the dislocations of global capitalism. Because waged labor is also liquid, highly mobile labor, migration from the Middle East is also marked by this dual nature. Workers moved first to cities within the region in search of work in the silk, cotton, and weaving industries. When an economic depression stagnated wages in the 1870s, Arab workers started to look for work abroad, helped along by advancements in steamship technology, permissive immigration regimes, and the emergence of Arab colonies across the Atlantic. Whether working in Beirut, Damascus, or in the New World, the assumption that emigration was a temporary venture, a buttress against the systemic economic inequalities wrought by global systems shaped Arab labor migration. But by 1900, emigration transformed into a permanent feature of the Ottoman economy, as Syria and Mount Lebanon depended on remittances from emigrants abroad.

The connection between Arab work in textiles and emigration was most acute in Ottoman Mount Lebanon, where as many as one in three people emigrated before 1914. Mount Lebanon’s silk industry boomed in the mid-19th century, owing to investment by French companies seeking silk thread to feed the factories of Lyon. Scholarship on Lebanese silk reveals a deeply gendered industry. Sericulture began as a household industry, but by the 1860s French companies hired “factory girls” to spin and reel silk thread as part of an all-
female workforce. Usually young, unmarried, or recently married, factory girls earned wages in industry that supplemented their natal families, enabling their extended household to maintain a more traditional peasant lifestyle centered on agriculture. A concomitant boom in Lebanese population and land hunger drove a need for cash wages that factory work could provide. Families invested this income into purchases of land (still the single largest desire for Mount Lebanese peasants) and later, in subsidizing the commercial ventures of male relatives.

Women’s wage work formed a crucial part of the proletarian economy in Syria and Mount Lebanon, but women’s wages also played a dramatic role in funding selective emigration abroad. The decision to emigrate was not an individual one, but was made at the level of the family and within a complex set of economic relations determined by access to networks of capital, information, and trust. The same family economy that enabled women’s local work in silk also drove young Arab men into diaspora, facilitating their travel and enabling them to absorb the risk of commercial failure. The earliest Arab migrants to the Americas worked in the textile industries, often applying skills honed in Ottoman factories before departure. As the diaspora emerged as a permanent feature of Syria’s social geography, women began to emigrate too. By the first decade of the 20th century, women represented more than 35 percent of Arab immigrants, and a significant portion of them worked in textiles. In one major continuity, the expectation that women’s work—and wages—belonged to her natal family persisted, following her into the diaspora. The idea that a woman’s work was temporary, a life phase associated with aspirational youth, was also evident in both Middle Eastern and Arab American communities.

The pursuit of wages led Arab workers into the cities and unmoored an entire generation from the land. Between 1860 and 1900, Ottoman Syria, Mount Lebanon, and Palestine experienced an unprecedented urbanization simultaneously. The transatlantic pattern of Arab labor migration after 1880, then, represents an extension of a pattern already in-the-making in the Middle East. Though recent arrivals in Levantine cities, many Arab workers were ultimately channeled through the port at Beirut toward Egypt, to Mediterranean ports, and beyond.
Major advances in steam and print also conspired to facilitate mass labor mobility. Steamship passenger transport came to the Ottoman eastern Mediterranean by 1836, but by the 1880s, the cost of a transatlantic ticket became small enough to be within the means of aspiring Syrian families. Steamships powered the “first wave globalization” of the late 19th century, a robust passenger traffic carried Arab migrants across the Atlantic along with millions of Italians, Greeks, Armenians, and Sephardic Jews. In addition to steam power, new communications technologies improved the flow of information across oceans. The telegraph and concurrent development of a private Arabic-language periodical press enabled Syrian émigré printers in Egypt, the United States, and Latin America to reach a global readership.

The extant literature on the globalization of the Arabic press demonstrates that the first syndicated periodicals appeared in Egypt by the 1870s. By the end of the century, Arabic newspapers had emerged in the Americas as well. In the United States, the first was New York City’s *Kawkab Amrika*, established in 1892 and edited by Najib Arbeely. Within a decade, New York City transformed into a major printing capital for the Arab world; along with São Paulo and Buenos Aires, New York hosted dozens of Arabic periodicals, each advertising employment opportunities, reporting on arrivals and departures, and providing rudimentary “lessons” in American culture. Several of these periodicals also opened reading rooms and libraries hosting literary salons and public news readings. It was in the reading rooms that the first émigré political parties also emerged.

In 1910, the invention of the Arabic wax linotype machine made printing as inexpensive and commonplace as the village rumor mill. The diaspora’s Arabic press sped up the migration decision-making process considerably: whereas Arab migrants once depended on personal circuits of kinship, trust, handshake credit, and word-of-mouth information about conditions in the diaspora, the press institutionalized these bonds and made such information widely available. With the power of steam and print combined, annual emigration from Ottoman Syria and Mount Lebanon increased steadily from the 1890s until the start of the First World War in 1914.
Figure 2: Annual Rate of Immigration to the United States from “Turkey in Asia,” 1891–1924. Immigrants from the Ottoman Arab provinces are represented in these data, but the figures do not account for return migration, circulation, or clandestine entry. A pattern of acceleration is evident before the First World War followed by a steep drop during the conflict, reflecting an allied blockade on the eastern Mediterranean.

Source: Karpat, “The Ottoman Emigration to America,” 202–204 (see Note 9).

Arab Labor Migration to the Americas, 1880–1920

By the late 1880s, Arab labor migration to the Americas reached a mass scale, linking workers within the Ottoman Empire to the rapidly expanding industrial economies of the post-Abolition Atlantic world. The first Arab migrants in the Americas already had extensive itineraries: most of them originally came from Mount Lebanon and western Syria but had spent time in Beirut, Alexandria, Cairo, Marseilles, or Barcelona, sometimes staying in these cities for weeks, months, or years along the way. In these transit cities and the receiving ports of the Atlantic world, a secondary industry of migration agencies (and the well-known agents, the simsar pl. simasir) emerged to smooth paperwork requirements, secure credit, and help new arrivals find work. By the 1890s, Arab “mother colonies” emerged in New York City, Buenos Aires, and São Paulo, with smaller communities filtering out from those entry points. Arriving in “Amreeka” (as it was commonly called in Arabic regardless of destination), labor migrants encountered a contradictory set of economic incentives, immigration restrictions, and political scrutiny across the Western hemisphere.

The labor needs of the post-Abolition Atlantic exerted a significant pulling power, as did the comparatively permissive immigration regimes in the three largest settler societies there. The abolition of African slavery in Argentina (1853), the United States (1865), and Brazil (1888) led all three nations to adopt strategies to attract immigrant workers from Europe and the Mediterranean. The United States’ first federal Immigration Act of 1864 included measures for government sponsorship of immigrant workers and established a
federal Immigration Commissioner, who verified the employment contracts of immigrants prior to their arrival, offered loans, and facilitated their transportation to American shores. Even as the United States began to restrict Asian immigration through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, it also continually competed with its southern neighbors for workers from Mediterranean Europe through state subsidies, planned resettlement/homesteading, and permissive naturalization laws. Arabic-speaking migrants hailing from “Turkey in Asia” (as the Ottoman Arab provinces were called) became the unintended beneficiaries of these schemes. Though they remained ineligible for programs targeting “desirable” European immigrants, they took advantage of the massive shipping industry made possible by other initiatives that linked the Mediterranean to the Atlantic world.

In both the United States and Latin America, officials cast immigrant desirability in racial, religious, and national origins terms, conflating these categories in ways that contradicted Ottoman understandings of demography. U.S. immigration agents struggled to categorize Arabic-speaking immigrants from the Ottoman Empire, for instance, and Arab immigrants were also acutely aware of the legal jeopardy posed by being perceived as non-white, non-Christian, or Asian. Until 1899, U.S. law classified Arab immigrants from the empire as “Turks,” having come from “Turkey in Asia.” But successful lobbying by Arab American groups prompted the U.S. to reclassify “Syrian” as its own category in 1899. Both Brazil and Argentina quickly followed suit. Even with a new legal category, however, what made a “Syrian” distinct from a “Turk” remained poorly understood in the Americas before the First World War. Though a de jure reflection of Arab migrants’ status as subjects of the Ottoman Empire, the category “Turk” was conflated with Muslim in U.S. law and the popular imagination, raising questions about the assimilability of Arab immigrants in the courts. The landmark racial prerequisite case, *Dow v. United States* (1915), granted Syrian immigrants naturalization rights based on their legal whiteness, but did so by conflating whiteness with a presumption of Syrian identity as Christian. The conflation of racial, religious, and national origins categories would continue to present problems for Middle Eastern immigrants through 1924, when the U.S. revised its immigration policies with the passage of the National Origins Act.

This classification presents a major issue for scholars trying to enumerate the early Arab American diaspora (*al-mahjar* in Arabic). In addition to difficulties parsing Arab immigrants from other Ottoman co-nationals, a growing share of Arab immigrants opted for clandestine means of immigration after the 1890s. The general scholarly consensus is that between 350,000 and 500,000 Arab immigrants arrived in the Americas between 1880 and 1926. The overwhelming majority of them settled in the United States (165,000), Brazil (162,000), and Argentina (148,000). A diaspora of this size represented between 18 and 25 percent of Ottoman Syria’s total population (including Mount Lebanon). Emigration was particularly concentrated in Ottoman Mount Lebanon; a third of that region’s population left before 1914, and some villages reported emigration rates of over 50 percent.
However, these estimates derive mostly from census data that are imperfect in significant ways. Scholars in Arab American studies often rely on U.S. census data, but the same categorical slippages that racialized “Syrian” and “Turkish” nationalities in America are also present in these data (especially in the most frequently cited 1920 U.S. census). The other major source of population data is Lebanon’s first census of 1921, a French Mandate project that included emigrant numbers in a bid to reclaim them for them for Lebanon. Recent scholarship contests its findings, revealing an uneven reporting of Lebanese emigrant populations by the Mandate for political purposes. The 1921 census’s finding that the Lebanese diaspora was 90 to 95 percent Christian, for instance, has been challenged as a faulty assumption resulting from overreliance on census data. Though faulty, the statistic continues to appear in some studies of Arab American demography, usually the result of scholars drawing on older studies like Philip K. Hitti’s 1924 book, The Syrians in America, the figure’s original source. Having undermined older statistics, no superior consensus has yet emerged regarding the Arab diaspora’s confessional makeup. The debate around census data illustrates that scholars must exercise caution when counting these communities.

The Ottoman Empire was ambivalent about the departure of Arab subjects to points abroad, yielding a contradictory set of policies designed, in turn, to halt emigration or further facilitate passage through Ottoman ports. Governed by a semi-autonomous mutasarrifate, Mount Lebanon maintained an exceptionally liberal travel policy that made Beirut a favored transit port at the height of Sultan Abdel Hamid II’s reign in the 1890s. At the same time, Istanbul sometimes exercised shipping controls on Beirut’s port, citing public health concerns but also targeting the departure of Mount Lebanese to America. The Ottoman Empire’s passport, called the mürûr tezkeresi, was designed to be used only for travel within the empire, but Arabs arriving in Brazil, Argentina, and the United States discovered that immigration agents accepted them for international travel as well.

After the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, the Ottoman Empire’s new government under the Committee of Union and Progress party (CUP) expressed fresh interest in politically reembracing Arab emigrants. The CUP government built new consulates in American cities hosting Arab immigrants, promoted commercial development and remittances, and sponsored repatriation of migrants to the Ottoman Empire. Cash remittances to the Middle East boomed, but the repatriation plan came to naught. Instead, the empire entered war in the Balkans in 1911, prompting massive emigration of Arab subjects evading military conscription. With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, an Allied naval blockade effectively stymied migration from the region until the war’s conclusion, but after 1920, mass emigration from Syria and Lebanese—now under French Mandate—resumed.

Halting new Syrian and Lebanese emigration to the Americas was a primary concern for the French Mandate, because the French saw the departure of workers abroad as an economic and demographic drain on the administration they built there. The High Commissioner of Beirut instituted policies to restrict departures of Lebanese through that city’s port, to incentivize repatriation of Lebanese from abroad, and to cooperate with receiving
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countries in immigration enforcement. When the United States imposed strict immigration quotas in 1921 and 1924, for instance, the French Mandate coordinated with U.S. authorities deporting Lebanese arrivals back to the Lebanon. The 1924 National Origins Act’s annual quota for Syria and Lebanon was a mere 100 persons, a restriction that remained in force until 1965. Its largest effects on Arab immigration lay in creating a market for clandestine immigration into the U.S. (usually by crossing the land border with Mexico) and channeling most Arab migrants toward the southern mahjar, principally to Brazil and Argentina. By 1926, the Arab communities in Latin America outnumbered those in the United States, making the southern mahjar proportionally more significant.

Varieties of Arab Labor in the Americas, 1900–1940

By the turn of the 20th century, urban “Syrian colonies” (al-jaliyyat al-suriyya) appeared in the United States, including New York City (which Alixa Naff memorably called the “mother colony,”) Boston, and Detroit with smaller Arab communities in Lawrence, Worcester, and Peabody, Massachusetts, and across Ohio, California, and the American South. These communities offered a variety of employment and credit opportunities to newcomers. As a result, Arab immigrants worked in several sectors of the economy, most of them linked to the manufacture, transport, and sale of textiles.

No single trade so dominates the historical memory of the Arab diasporas as that of peddler. Often invoked as a romantic figure in oral histories, Arab peddlers are celebrated as figures of an entrepreneurial class of pioneers in early Arab American history, so much so that recent work in the field critiques the historical erasures inherent in “peddlers to proprietors” mythology. Evelyn Shakir reveals that though peddlers dominate popular
memory, proletarian factory work was at least as common and perhaps more so. In the United States, Arab immigrants engaged in all facets of the textile industry, working from weaving and cutting to piecework, garment working, lace and embroidery, and sales. Cotton broadcloth and silk predominated in Syrian factories, but leatherworking and haberdashery also represented a portion of the Syrian economies in the Americas.

Across the spectrum of Ottoman subjects in America, a tendency emerged for immigrant workers from distinctive ethnic, linguistic, or geographic (village-based) communities to bind together in specific patterns of labor. Turkish and Kurdish speaking Ottoman immigrants, for instance, had greater representation in the leather industry, machining, and other heavy industries in New England, and along with them a higher concentration of Arab Muslims from Syria and Palestine. Arab Christians from Mount Lebanon were most represented in silk garments, especially in the production of “Oriental style” kimonos and laces popularized by New York City’s “little Syria” neighborhood in the 1920s. Syrian migrants from Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and Damascus filtered through various facets of textile production, but especially concentrated in cotton broadcloth weaving, piecework, and shirtwaist and garment production.

This tendency toward concentration of Arab workers in certain sectors reflects labor patterns and skills honed in the Middle East, before arrival in America. Employment networks channeled Arab laborers into particular pursuits: prior experience with silk, cotton, or leather conditioned the employment possibilities immigrants faced in the U.S. Most Arab and Ottoman workers either possessed technical skills required in these industries or else knew someone who had. Nevertheless, this tendency to work in patterns that mirrored those of the Ottoman Empire meant that certain sectors of the Arab textile industry boomed, even as other waned. In the case of silks and cotton garments, Arab merchants sponsored a pattern of vertical integration after 1900: Syrian factories emerged, attached to Syrian storefronts, Syrian shipping companies, Syrian peddlers, and financed by Syrian banks. All advertised their wares in Syrian periodicals across both American continents as well as in the Middle East.

The transition of the immigrant community from labor migration to labor management came in the first years of the 20th century. In the United States, Syrian-only textile factories appeared in New York and New England as early as 1905, with the establishment of Nasib ‘Arida’s silk firm in Brooklyn. Already a successful clothier, ‘Arida opened the factory with his brothers, producing mostly silk kimonos to supply Syrian stores across the city in 1905. He borrowed this experiment from the experience of Mount Lebanon’s silk industry, and he maintained a strictly sex-segregated workplace: Syrian women worked in pieces and embroidery upstairs, supplying Mahal ‘Arida, where Syrian men mixed with buyers and wholesalers. ‘Arida’s vertical integration of garment making with sales proved successful, and Mahal ‘Arida set the tone for all-Syrian factory work for a generation. By 1921, a half-dozen Syrian factories producing only silk kimonos had appeared in the Syrian quarter (on Washington Street) alone. Like Mahal ‘Arida, they too relied on an all-female workforce.
The largest Syrian textile firm in New York was *Mahal 'Abdallah Barsa*, a massive wholesale outfit that supplied American boutiques as well as lingerie, laces, and embroidery for export. In one major departure from precedent, 'Abdallah Barsa hired both men and women for garment manufacturing, but even his factory floors were sex-segregated with women sewing in a female-only space.40 Outside the United States, factories even larger than Barsa’s boomed: the Na’imi Jafet cotton cloth factory in Ypiranga, Brazil ran 1,000 mechanical looms, staffed by Syrian weavers contracted directly from the Middle East.41 Of course, many Syrians continued to work for U.S. firms alongside a cosmopolitan working class of immigrant Italians, Greeks, and eastern Europeans, but the advent of the Syrian shop floor represented a shift toward proprietorship that pushed Arab American communities into the middle class while also fueling remittances to the homeland.

![Figure 4: The 'Abdallah Barsa factory in New York City, 1920. Both men and women worked at the Barsa factory but maintained a gendered division of labor: men worked in weaving, cutting, and sales while women completed piecework and laces. Source: Mukarzil, *Tarikh al-Tijara al-Suriyya fi-l-Mahajir al-Amrikiyya*, 50 (see Note 39).](image)

Peddling was an easy trade for newly arriving migrants: it demanded no technical skills or start-up capital and only a little knowledge of English, which the peddler picked up on the way. Easy credit and the efforts of agents employed by the textile firms put capital and goods in the hands of peddlers. Both men and women engaged in this casual commerce: though romantic images of peddlers traditionally code him as male, Arab women became effective peddlers owing to their unique access to the bourgeois household and direct marketing to other women.43

Peddling businesses also varied considerably by scale. More successful peddlers followed the rail lines to move their wares inland, opening wholesale businesses serving Arab American communities in Ohio, Illinois, and Michigan as well as in Canada. Proprietors brought male relatives and families from the homeland to found "& Bros" companies that
moved products across state or international lines. On the U.S. southern border, Arab peddlers managed a carrying trade linking New York firms with Arab communities in Mexico. This border commerce presented a challenge to U.S. officials, who, after 1910, increasingly surveilled and occasionally detained Middle Eastern peddlers they suspected of smuggling contraband.

Peddling and wholesale commerce also supported the growth of a Syrian financial sector and shipping companies, institutions that provided the means for Arab workers to migrate and travel abroad. A mutualism emerged between Syrian migrant banks, textile firms, and would-be migrant labor. In New York City, the Faour Brothers Bank, established in 1914, provided credit and investment services to the city’s larger textile firms, as well as to shipping companies like A. K. Hitti and Co. bringing goods to Atlantic and Mediterranean ports. Such shipping agencies facilitated inexpensive travel across the diaspora or back to the Middle East; in addition to such patterns of circular migration, cities served by A. K. Hitti and Co. were also hubs for Syrian peddling. A similar link between émigré finance, textiles, and labor migration is evident in Latin America. Jose Moises Azize founded the Banco Siriolibanés of Buenos Aires in 1924. Alsmot, the president of the city’s Syrian Lebanese mutual aid society, Azize, was entrusted by the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon to supply new Arab labor migrants with passports.

Within immigrant neighborhoods, meanwhile, Arab migrants opened an array of businesses serving the ethnic community: greengrocers, pharmacies, and dry goods; legal services—especially related to immigrant naturalization—and leisure spaces like cafés, reading rooms, and restaurants. These institutions gave the Arab neighborhood its distinctive character. In New York City’s Lower East Side, restaurants like the Kirdahy Brothers Oriental Restaurant, established in 1913 and later renamed The Sheikh, served Syrian fare to locals as well as visitors in pursuit of “exotic” new flavors. Immigrant hostels gave shelter to new arrivals, and provided a space for workers to meet with employment agencies. Cafés and reading rooms offered creative outlets for Arab men, and in 1920 these salons gave setting to Pen League (al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya) writers like Gibran Kahlil
Rich in intellectual amenities, café culture in Arab New York was nevertheless organized around specific clientele, attached to discrete Arabic periodicals (nearly a dozen existed in New York City), and they often had formal relationships with émigré fraternal associations.

By 1914, Arab workers in this diaspora usually had recourse to a vast and growing network of mutual aid societies and philanthropic groups that provided a safety net in trying times. Established in New York in 1908 and Boston in 1917, the Syrian-Lebanese Ladies Aid Society (SLLAS) raised relief for Arab women workers and their families, providing heating oil, powdered milk, flour, food, and after 1920, even a boarding house for the unemployed within the community. Arab women’s mutual aid represented a class-conscious endeavor: the SLLAS’s founders included garment-makers like Hannah Sabbagh who, before founding the society’s Boston branch, labored in the mills of Fall River and Lowell, Massachusetts, from age 15. In times of political catastrophe, these organizations merged textile work and charity even more closely: Sabbagh’s diaries describe a 1918 drive to produce blankets, winter coats, and undergarments for export to war-torn Syria and Mount Lebanon, working in conjunction with Arab nationalists in New York and the American Red Cross. Men’s fraternal organizations also emerged in the diaspora, serving impoverished Arab immigrants. But unlike the “ladies’ aid” societies organized around an emerging Arab feminist movement, men’s clubs tended to organize around through village networks—the Ramallah Men’s Club; Mt. Lebanon Club; Homsi Fraternal Society, and so forth—or through émigré political parties. Private mutual aid functioned as a core pillar of the local migrant community.

The labor militancy of the U.S. garment industry also influenced social activism in the Arab American context. Arab workers participated in major strike actions, including the 1908 “Uprising of 30,000” in New York City and the 1912 “Bread and Roses” strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Because they were more likely than men to work in factories among immigrants from other Mediterranean groups like the Italians and Greeks, Syrian women textile workers were more apt to participate in organized labor and strike actions. For example, at the 1912 “Bread and Roses” strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the Boston chapter of the Syrian Ladies Aid Society organized a “relief kitchen” for strikers, preparing meals of bulgur wheat, rice, lamb, and yogurt for striking millworkers. Of the women workers on strike in Lawrence, 11 percent were Syrian.

Impact of Labor Emigration on the Middle East

Arab labor migration to the Americas shaped the economies, states, and societies of the Middle East in multiple ways, including enabling cash remittances; providing the foundation of Arab overseas charities, educational societies, and political parties; generating emigrant investment in development projects; and influencing return migration of Arabs from abroad. These impacts are well known but less well researched than other facets of Arab labor migration. Remittances, for example, are perilously difficult to track before
1920, owing to the rudimentary nature of the diaspora’s early banking structures and the widespread practice of sending cash home through clandestine channels. In 1900, Mount Lebanon received around 200,000 British pounds annually from its migrants abroad. Ten years later, in 1910, this figure had appreciated to 800,000 a year, reflecting both growing numbers of Arab emigrants and their commercial success. By 1917, remittances constituted Mount Lebanon’s single largest economic resource, around 220 million Ottoman piasters as compared to the silk trade’s 60 million, agriculture’s 30 million, and industry’s 10 million. Much of those funds came, however, as war relief. Even with these caveats, remittance rates clearly illustrate that overseas Arab communities possessed significant and growing economic power in their home countries before 1920.

Return migration is also a tricky metric to assess, but it is widely acknowledged that the repatriation of Arab workers from abroad operated as a major feature of the French Mandate era in the eastern Mediterranean (1920–1946). Rates of return vary: a tentative Lebanese estimate is that between one-third and one-half of all Lebanese who left the Middle East before 1914 ultimately returned to Lebanon after 1920. In Lebanon, returning emigrants also invested in infrastructural and economic development projects, working with French authorities in Beirut. The government also took measures to smooth repatriation of Lebanese emigrants, counting them in Lebanon’s censuses of 1921 and 1932, for instance, as well as offering provisions under Lebanon’s 1925 Nationality Law for emigrants to claim citizenship rights. In interwar Syria, by contrast, the impacts of return migration, remittances, and diasporic investment remain substantially less certain, in large part because the French Mandate did not offer similar opportunities to Syrians abroad. The French ruled Syria primarily through military force, and Mandate officials viewed the Syrian diaspora as a source of political threat, imposing limitations on emigrant travel rights and opposing the extension of Syrian nationality to emigrants. That said, Arab emigrants abroad still found ways to invest in Syria, funding the construction of new schools, hospitals, and orphanages in districts outside Damascus and underserved by the French Mandate.

State of the Research and New Directions

The massive displacements of refugee populations in the contemporary Middle East have renewed interest in the histories and experiences of Arab migrants to the Atlantic world, in part in an effort to more deeply understand American debates about the inclusion or exclusion of migrants from this part of the world. There are several challenges that will confront researchers of Arab Atlantic history, but there are also compelling historiographic frontiers that await inspired exploration.

First, ongoing geopolitical instability compounds the archival challenges implicit in studying Middle Eastern migrant populations. The closure or destruction of archives in Syria and a prevailing mood of fiscal austerity in the United States create significant limitations on access to state-run archives, but the abundance of informal archives also opens radical opportunities to researchers to document migrant social histories through non-traditional
means. Scholars in Arab American, Muslim American, and mahjar studies work primarily from socially-produced archives existing beyond government records: letters and correspondence, diaries, family papers, oral histories, literary production, and the Arab American periodical press. The same connectivities that lent the “colonies” of the Arab Atlantic a high degree of economic integration also resulted in a remarkable archival footprint scattered across four continents. Moreover, scholarship in mahjar studies has also begun to formulate a critique of the state-centrism that guides the historiography on im/migration. By building from the indigenous archives of Arab workers on the move, mahjari scholarship pursues these workers into clandestine spaces beyond the reach of the state and its regulatory apparatuses. The pursuit also leads scholars to query the marginalization of migrants in state records and the replication of this marginality in historical writing.

In addition to pursuing indigenous archives for Arab migration, researchers in Arab American studies have increasingly adopted digital tools to improve access to rare manuscripts for public use. Open-access digitization projects are underway, for instance, at the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan; the Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies at North Carolina State University; the Immigration History Research Center at University of Minnesota; and the Lebanese Emigration Research Center at Notre Dame University, Lebanon. These repositories have prioritized the open-access digitization of original documents, allowing new researchers to sample social historical texts remotely and facilitating scholarly exchange through workshops, publications, and peer-to-peer collaborations.

Still, the challenge remains for scholars working to recover histories of Arab American workers, labor, or working-class politics in the diaspora. Most of the available scholarship in the Arab Atlantic has focused on the formation of the transnational middle class, working primarily from bourgeois institutions and the remarkably loquacious writings of Arab American intellectuals, newspapermen, and professionals. This is a broader feature observed by migration historians working across several settings and is generally remarked as a reflection of the available archives. This means, however, that new histories of Arab workers, labor, and working-class politics require a further investigation into archives of workers’ organizations, trade unions, and mutual aid societies. Evelyn Shakir issued an early call for a working-class history of the Arab diaspora, writing, “many Syrians, both male and female, worked in the textile industry, though their participation in the labor force has been largely ignored by historians of the Arab American experience.”

Historians have begun to address this lacunae, and because women represented an estimated 35 percent of Arab industrial workers through the interwar period, gender prevails as a major analytic of any working class history of this mahjar.

Finally, new research into the Arab Atlantic is pushing in the direction of questioning the disciplinary bifurcations of the area studies model, especially across U.S. and Latin American histories. The circulation of Arab labor migrants across both Americas, North and South, and the simultaneity of changes to the immigration regimes they faced everywhere calls into question of older, single-sited framings of American immigration and eth-
nic history. A diasporic lens noting the connectivities of Arab American economies, printing networks, mutual aid societies, and the arts across the Atlantic world presents a compelling new trend in this field. Emerging work on Islam in the Americas, moreover, unpacks the North-South divide in American studies while also experimenting with an interethnic focus that queries the relationships between Middle Eastern immigrant, African American, and Latinx Muslims. Though multifarious, these bodies of work share a radical social historical bent that lends them the ability to transcend methodological nationalisms by instead drawing on lived experiences, ethnographic data, oral histories, or unconventional archives to discover commonalities in migrant lives. Like other migrants in America, Arab labor migrants worked not at the margins of other people’s histories; they lived at the center of their own.

**Primary Sources**

Several repositories have collected materials related to Arab migration to the Americas, usually focusing on a specific facet or type of research material relevant to scholars and the broader public. The Arab American National Museum (AANM) in Dearborn, Michigan, maintains a growing archive of Arab American life in the United States, including two large collections donated by early researchers in the field: the Evelyn Shakir Collection and Michael W. Suleiman Collection. The AANM has also begun a digitization effort, making materials in the Shakir Collection accessible for the broader public. At the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, the Immigration History Research Center Archives have preserved the personal papers of Dr. Philip K. Hitti, James Ansara, and Francis Maria, among others. These personal paper collections document the early Arab American communities of New York and Massachusetts in remarkable detail, and include lengthy correspondence between Arab American intellectuals, social activists, and professionals from 1900 to the 1940s. In Washington, DC, the Smithsonian Institution houses the Faris and Yamna Naff Arab American Collection, which includes valuable oral history testimonies of first-generation Arab, Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian Americans in the United States. More recently, the Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies at North Carolina State University has established an archive devoted to the preservation of family histories and papers. The Khayrallah Center has also begun a digitization project of major Arab American newspapers in the United States. Regarding the press, the Center for Research Libraries (CRL) in Chicago houses the largest single collection of Arab American newspapers. The CRL Ethnic Newspaper collection includes full sets of over a dozen Arabic-language periodicals printed in the United States, most of them preserved on microfilm that can be lent out to partner institutions. The Library of Congress in Washington, DC also holds loanable Arab American newspapers on microfilm, some of which have been digitized.

In Lebanon, the Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC) at the Notre Dame University, Louaize, is the country’s dedicated repository for study of emigration. LERC has an ongoing digitization effort and its collections include materials from the Lebanese National Archives, the Maronite Patriarchal Archives in Bkerke, and family collections, personal papers, and correspondence focused largely on the 20th century. LERC also partners with
Latin American archives and libraries to provide digital copies of materials to researchers in the Middle East. The Nami Jafet Memorial Library at the American University of Beirut holds additional records related to Lebanese in America as well as Lebanese-American relations generally. The Jafet Library has preserved the personal library of Philip K. Hitti as well as several dozen periodicals from the Arab communities of Latin America.

**Links to Digital Materials**

**Arab American National Museum, Dearborn, MI**

**Center for Research Libraries**

**Immigration History Research Center Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis**

**Lebanese Emigration Research Center, Notre Dame University, Lebanon**

**Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, North Carolina State University**

**Nami Jafet Memorial Library at the American University of Beirut**

**Smithsonian Institution Faris and Yamna Naff Arab American Collection**

**Further Reading**


Arab Labor Migration in the Americas, 1880–1930


Notes:


Arab Labor Migration in the Americas, 1880–1930


Arab Labor Migration in the Americas, 1880–1930


(25.) Khater, Inventing Home, 110.


(28.) Sally Howell, Old Islam in Detroit: Rediscovering the Muslim American Past (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); María del Mar Longroño Narbona, Paulo G. Pinto, and John Tofik Karam, eds., Crescent Over Another Horizon: Islam in Latin America, the
The origin of this figure is Philip Hitti’s *The Syrians in America*, which drew from U.S. census data that conflated “Syrian” with Arab Christians and “Turk” with Muslims. For a critique, see Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 128–133.


Shakir, *Bint Arab*, 46–47.


(41.) Antonius Jafet, Dhikriyyat, 12.


(43.) Gualtieri, “Gendering the Chain Migration Thesis,” 68-70.


(45.) Devi Mays, “Transplanting Cosmopolitanisms.”


(51.) Arab American National Museum, Dearborn, Michigan. Evelyn Shakir Papers, Box 2, Folder 4, Hannah Sabbagh interview with Evelyn Shakir, Sabbagh Family Reunion Book, 5-6; and According to Shakir, Hannah and her brothers later opened a factory making aprons in East Boston, Shakir, Bint Arab, 43.


(53.) Shakir, Bint Arab, 48. Shakir also reports that a Syrian named John Ramey was killed when police confronted strikers.


Gualtieri, “Gendering the Chain Migration Thesis,” 68.

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