RETURN MIGRATION AND REPATRIATION

Myths and realities in the interwar Syrian mahjar

Stacy D. Fahrenthold

Introduction

‘I intended to go back [to Lebanon] and practice medicine at home after graduation’, began Simon Abdelnour in a 1962 interview with historian Alixa Naff, ‘but I was prevented from doing so by the war’ (Abdelnour, 1962). It was 1914, and the Triple Entente placed a naval blockade on the eastern Mediterranean, effectively marooning Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian migrants abroad. Abdelnour had come to the United States as a student, with a group of young men for whom the trip to the mahjar (diaspora) was supposed to be a temporary sojourn. Arabic-speaking immigrants in the Americas came from a variety of class backgrounds and worked in a variety of trades: as professionals and students, as labourers, industrial workers and peddlers. Alixa Naff’s oral history series reveals how even in this diversity of early Arab American experiences, one common narrative feature presides: the initial expectation that immigration was temporary, eventual return to the Middle East was the goal, and that the force of historical circumstances forced a change in plans post-arrival (Naff, 1985, p. 127). In Abdelnour’s case, fluctuating laws governing repatriation frustrated his attempts to return to Lebanon: ‘I applied for a passport to go back but they weren’t issuing passports; this was in 1919–20 … I came to Los Angeles and gave up the idea of going back to Lebanon’ (Abdelnour, 1962). Another of Naff’s interlocutors named Alice Abraham (who in 1909 came to America from Ayn Arab, unaccompanied at 15 years old) put it succinctly: ‘I came to the U.S. to stay, but I was more sure of that after I got here’ (Abraham, 1962, 1:11:40–1:11:50).

Scholars often comment on the ubiquity of return as a feature of Arab American historical narratives, part of an autobiographical storytelling that shapes the mahjar’s historical consciousness and upsets the linear ‘to America’ archetype. Historians insist that return migration to the Mashriq (defined here as Syria, Lebanon and Palestine) not only occurred in the interwar period but that it was more common than is popularly assumed. However, even as scholars routinely acknowledge return migration as relevant, the topic remains a vexing and understudied issue in the subfield. A notable exception, Akram Khater’s (2001) Inventing Home, demonstrates how returning Lebanese emigrants shaped the architectural tastes, aesthetics and feminist debates of Lebanon’s middle class, themes also pursued in Palestine studies by Jacob Norris (2017, pp. 60–75) and Nadim Bawalsa (2015). But significant questions remain about the broader issues of
migrant repatriation to the Middle East, with implications for societal impact, cultural hybridity and the politics of citizenship and nationality.

Migration historians approach the concept of diaspora alongside other forms of meso-level analysis. Situated between global, structural, and local determinants, meso-level analysis critiques neoclassical theories of migration rooted in push/pull functionalism, linear models or labour flows between economic cores and peripheries (Lucassen and Lucassen, 1997; Wimmer and Schiller, 2002). Instead, diasporas are held together by migrant social networks and are continually refreshed by ongoing circulations of people, goods and ideas (Clifford, 1994, pp. 302–305). A diaspora is both a social geography and a cultural space that ‘is not congruent with physical geography’ but is produced by migrant institutions, such as mutual aid societies, employment networks or circuits of information. These institutions maintain and continue to shape diasporic space, simultaneously creating and constraining opportunities for the individuals privy to them (McKeown, 2004, pp. 178–179). This focus on circulation, social geography and the dynamic of agency to structure marks a departure from older notions of diaspora centred on cataclysmic displacement, ‘scattering’, loss of homeland or permanent exile (Safran, 1991). Most notably, in a diaspora that is multi-centred and shaped by enduring connectivities, both circular and return migration are not only possible, often they are likely (Hoerder, 1999).

Still, even with this dynamic theory of diaspora, the impact of return migration remains a road less travelled for historians. A closer look at return migration deepens the conceptual terrain of diaspora, for instance, by challenging the assumptions of the place-based area studies tradition (Arsan, Karam and Khater, 2013). Put another way, diasporas do more than add to the social histories of the Middle East; they also transform the region.

Rates of return migration from the interwar mahjar also reform long-standing notions about the relationship of economic cores to peripheries. Most of the historiography on American labour migration is informed by the settlement studies tradition and consequently focuses on immigrant integration, class mobility and other measures of (usually economic) success after arrival. The ‘settlement studies’ frame allows scholars to answer important questions about immigrant lives and advocacy abroad, especially concerning ethnicisation, racialisation, and more recently, surveillance and migration restriction in the Global North (Lucassen and Lucassen, 1997, pp. 21–25). However, its hegemony produced a blind spot with regard to circular and return migration. For many Middle Eastern migrant workers in the Americas, the diaspora represented structural economic and legal precarity, not a space of integration, multiculturalism or success. Towards building a research agenda for analysing return migration to the Middle East, this chapter considers return along three planes: (1) as a scholarly problem; (2) as a set of diasporic myths; and (3) as a reality undertaken by thousands of migrants during the interwar period. It sets out core issues confronting scholars of return migration; introduces relevant historiography and comparisons between the Syrian, Lebanese and Palestine cases; and argues in favour of deeper reflection on return migration as a core facet of Arab Atlantic history.

**Return as a scholarly problem**

Though enumerating the mahjar is a fraught business, historians have arrived at a rough consensus concerning rates of emigration from Ottoman Mashriq (Syria, Mount Lebanon and Palestine) between 1880 and 1926, arriving at figures between 300,000 and 500,000 people in the Americas. Mass emigration from the Ottoman Empire began in the 1880s, and Charles Issawi (1982, p. 86) estimates that perhaps 120,000 people left Syria, Mount Lebanon and Palestine before 1900. Emigration sped up in the decade before the First World War, with 15,000 departing greater Syria annually. Most were bound for the United States, Brazil or
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Argentina, each country hosting over 100,000 migrants by 1910. Smaller settlements emerged across the Americas, particularly in Chile, Mexico, Honduras, Cuba and Canada. Emigration halted during the war but picked up again in the 1920s. Using French Mandate statistics, Kohei Hashimoto (1992, p. 105) concludes that the Syrian and Lebanese in the Americas numbered 550,000 by 1926, a figure that excludes Palestinians under British Mandate. Emigrants in the Americas represented between 18 and 25 per cent of greater Syria’s total population (Issawi 1992, p. 31). The demographic impact of emigration was lumpy and particularly high in places like Mount Lebanon, where some villages sent a third of their population abroad.

Several factors trouble this data, complicating more rigorous quantification of return migration patterns. First, these data derive from port records or census data, imperfect proxies for assessing migration rates. Relying on exit port registries creates blind spots around clandestine migration, for instance, and limits the impact that trajectory had on destinations. Many migrants departed Beirut, for ‘Amrika’ and ended up, not in the United States as planned, but in Latin America (Khater, 2001, p. 62). Entry records across the Americas are spotty, non-standard, and notoriously unreliable. Between 1880 and 1920, Atlantic settler states focused on categorising arriving immigrants along racial, ethnic and later national origin categories associated with eugenicist ideas about assimilability. Determining the origins of Middle Eastern migrants is complicated by the shifting classificatory regimes they encountered. Arabic-speaking migrants from the Mashriq were variously classified as ‘Turks’, as ‘Syrians’ and occasionally as ‘Assyrians’, categories themselves conflated with religious confession. US immigration registers disaggregated ‘Syrian’ from ‘Turk’ in 1899, but the categories were still used unpredictably (Gualtieri, 2009, p. 77). Other Atlantic states employed these national origins markers similarly, conflating geographic terminologies with ethnic, racial or sectarian descriptors (Civantos, 2006, pp. 1–13; Karam, 2007, pp. 71–94). Finally, entry records lacked information on migrant departures; the constant circulation of migrants between mahjar and Mashriq confounded immigration registration regimes that focused solely on arrivals. Census data can be similarly problematic because imprecise immigration categories were iterated there as well.

With those caveats aside, in this chapter I propose points of entry into the study of interwar return migration, considering the ways that return operated as an idea within the mahjar’s transnational milieu before, during and after the First World War. As an ideal associated with notions of exile, sojourning and liberation, return assumed a cultural currency and gave meaning to the lives of individuals, held families together, or comprised a part of a larger diasporic worldview. I then examine actual experiences of return migration and repatriation, observing trends during the 1920s and 1930s. Along the way, I argue that Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians living abroad grappled with the question of repatriation. Return figured in the mahjar’s mythologies, in its politics and as lived experience in the interwar period.

Return as mythology: literary and ideological tropes

The anticipation of return represents a core mythology of diaspora, a preoccupation remarked by scholars of Jewish, Armenian, Chinese and African histories. The terms by which a return to a homeland is imagined vary widely, connected to the circumstances of departure, the material and affective conditions of émigré communities, the prevalence of information or travel technologies (print culture, the telegraph, steamship, rail or air travel), or the emergence of diasporic nationalisms. The return narrative operated at several valances at once. It was a mundane feature of economic migration, an autobiographical story told by migrant workers who arrived abroad. Return also played a role in the mahjar’s intellectual imaginary, part of a cultural politics expressed by the Pen League writers of Syrian New York and their interlocutors in Latin
America (for instance, São Paulo’s Andalusian League). Finally, the topos of return took on political content after the First World War and was a favourite topic for diasporic nationalist activism in Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian contexts.

That Arabic-speaking Ottomans came to the Americas as sojourners (not as settlers) represents a point of consensus in the available scholarship. Whether coming as workers, peddlers, students or professionals, migrants described their motivations as economic, their goal to improve on their families’ material conditions and return home with enhanced social mobility. Sarah Gualtieri (2009, p. 39) captures this autobiographical narrative, quoting a 1910 newspaper interview:

If you ask a Syrian in North or South America whether he has emigrated from Syria, he will reply, “Absolutely not. I am away from her for a while. I left in search of wealth, and when I succeed I will return to my homeland.”

The theme recurs in oral history testimonies given to Alixa Naff, revealing it as both more and less than nostalgia: it was also a mundane detail, a commonplace expectation (Naff, 1985).

Return also represented a potent literary theme in Arab American literature, connected with transcendental expressions about the relationship between cultures ‘East’ and ‘West’. The Book of Khalid, published in English by Ameen Rihani in 1911, tells the story of Khalid and Shakib, two men who left Lebanon to work as peddlers in New York, where they end up in a tangle amid atheists, bohemians and corrupt political functionaries before returning home (Rihani, 2011). Rather than pantomiming the idealised return, which was then common within mahjar poetry (Nijland, 1989; Jubran, 2007; Hassan, 2008), Rihani depicts Khalid as the fool who charges back into the Ottoman Levant with reformist pretensions only to be excommunicated from the Maronite Church, cause a riot in Damascus and have his marriage plans spurned (Schumann, 2008, pp. 244–247). He becomes a hermit in the Lebanese Mountains for a time, momentarily reappears amid the 1908 Revolution’s tumult, and then vanishes again in the novel’s conclusion.

The narration of diaspora as exile also fed specific political patterns. After 1908, Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian émigré intellectuals employed return as an arm of a larger nationalist politics, politicising the trope by putting it in service to explicit, programmatic claims to a post-Ottoman territory. Their long-distance nationalism differed from earlier articulations of the return trope in two ways. First, by generating ‘an emotional attachment that is strong enough to compel people to political action that ranges from displaying a home country flag to deciding to return to fight and die in a land they may never have seen’, diaspora nationalists claimed both the migrant generation and their children born abroad as part of a national community stretching beyond territorial borders (Schiller and Fouron, 2001, p. 4). Second, opposing the sentimentality evinced by the exile trope, long-distance nationalist politics prompted dynamic action in service to the homeland, a shared obligation resting on emigrants’ shoulders. During the First World War, nationalist parties in the Americas invoked the obligations of Syrian emigrants abroad to save their homeland from the ‘Turkish yoke’ (nir al-atruk), retroactively recoding Ottoman rule as four centuries of hostile occupation by a foreign power. Randa Tawil, for instance, illustrates how Ameen Rihani’s wartime writings renarrated Syrian migration as a flight from the empire’s ‘criminal tyranny’ and concomitant indebtedness to the homeland (Tawil 2018, pp. 96–97).

The culmination of this politics came after the Ottoman Empire’s 1918 evacuation from the Arab provinces. As the Great Powers negotiated the terms of the region’s postwar administration, émigré political associations lobbied their allies on behalf of Syrian, Lebanese and
Palestinian compatriots. Many activists already had ties to the Entente, for instance through war work in intelligence, immigration advocacy and humanitarianism. During the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, these migrant associations petitioned in support of multiple nationalist projects, plotting a spectrum of opinion along the terms of national independence (complete and immediate versus some form of ‘aegis’, ‘technical support’ or ‘protectorate’ status guaranteed by France, Great Britain or the United States) among Arab nationalists, Syrianists and Lebanists (Hakim, 2013, pp. 214–221). The French Foreign Ministry, in particular, cultivated allies in the mahjar who submitted petitions of support for a French Mandate (Narbona, 2007). These petition campaigns were so prolific that they have inspired a robust scholarship of their own (Arsan, 2012; Jackson, 2012; Bailony, 2018). As diverse as they were, the idea that returning emigrants would rebuild the Middle East was a constant refrain, evident in this selection of petitions submitted to the peace conference from the Syrian mahjar:

Syrians in the U.S.A. have already become in a way Americanized, and as a large majority of them is expected to return to Syria, once the odious Turkish yoke is lifted off, they will not wish anything better than to continue to breathe the same strong atmosphere of American liberty in their own country.

(New Syrian National League, 1919, p. 8)

This emigration on a large scale of Syrians, has given new economic resources and fresh social and intellectual powers to the country. As a result of being associated, for long years, with highly civilized people abroad the Syrian emigrants have, on their return, brought home many social improvements, sterling democratic principles and up-to-date fashions.

(‘Reborn Syria’: an appeal to the League of Nations union, 1919, p. 9)

Another resultant blessing of American guidance will be the return of the bulk of Syrian emigrants without whom it will take Syria and especially the Lebanon more than a generation to return even to normality … inducements are needed to reinforce in them the enfeebled attraction of the homeland. It is remembered that the flower of Syrian manhood has perished during the war, and that the moral and material generation of Syria depends … on the return of her virile manhood from abroad.

(Tabet, 1919, pp. 10–11)

These 1919 petitions link three projects into a potent triad: migrant repatriation, postwar reconstruction and nationalist reform. The gendered construction of repatriation as restorative to masculinity was also common within diasporic nationalist writings (Fahrenthold, 2014, pp. 263–264).

That said, return functioned as more than a nationalist rallying cry. In 1920s Arab feminist publications, writers employed the dislocations and estrangements (ghurba) experienced by women returning from the mahjar as a vehicle for critique of nationalist politics. Though marginalised by the mainstream mahjari press (which espoused the views and voices of émigré men’s clubs), women writers engaged one another in the pages of women’s newspapers produced in Beirut, New York, Boston, São Paulo, and beyond. ‘Afifa Karam, Julia Dimashqi, Victoria Tannous and Salwa Salama Atlas (among others) articulated a feminism of the ‘new woman’ defined by links to the international women’s movement; demands for access to rights
of employment, education and public spaces; and explicit challenges to the patriarchal leanings of nationalist parties. They folded these demands within established discourses about women as civilisational agents and national mothers (Khater, 2001, pp. 146–159; Baron, 2007, pp. 7–9).

The act of returning took on a particular role in feminist discourse in the mahjar. Afifa Karam wrote at length about Syrian women abroad, arguing they were privy to the ‘civilising benefits’ of the American shop floor. In New York City’s al-Akhlāq in 1920, she wrote:

[M]ost of us will recall that common saying uttered by our civilised men that ‘the [Syrian] women in America behave better than the men’, [because] the women work for the benefit of our brothers and sisters ... and at the same time, she does not return as herself; the times and their virtues have impressed themselves upon her.

(Karam, 1920, p. 7)

Karam and her contemporaries shaped a discourse around the notion that emigrant women could also offer political education to their homeland sisters. Akram Khater (2001, p. 169) discusses how class-based tensions sat amid mahjari feminist discourses, ‘as much as emigrants brought back with them the seeds of middle-class society, they also carried along the arguments, debates, and tensions which were part and parcel of that phenomenon’.

For some, migrant repatriation represented neither a culmination of independence nor feminist liberation, but an escape from American racism and xenophobia. Writing to The Syrian World in 1927, Dr Michael Shadid opined that Syrian immigrants would never be accepted in the United States and would always face racial discrimination. The solution, he argued, was in return to the Middle East, and Syrian World editor Salloum Mukarzil printed his proposal for an organised return to Syria. A debate ensued, with readers writing in to reject Dr Shadid’s assertions and tally the cultural costs and benefits of ‘Americanism’, defined as assimilation, economic integration or hybridisation of Syrian and American cultures. The debate in The Syrian World was lengthy and fraught, revealing that even as some migrants endorsed repatriation, others were anxious about whether repatriation projects like Shadid’s would undermine the community’s right to remain in America (Halaby, 1987, pp. 55–65). In the end, politics alone did not seem to provide much impetus for actual return migration. According to Sarah Gualtieri (2009, p. 107), ‘Shadid had justified his “back to Syria” crusade in other than economic terms’. Like the nationalist repatriation campaigns, Shadid’s idea came to nought. When Arab emigrants did return home, their motivations were almost invariably economic. Having found either fortune or failure in the mahjar, they boarded steamships headed east when the diaspora’s economic circumstances shifted into the 1930s.

The politics of migrant repatriation to Syria, Lebanon and Palestine

Although the notion of a planned mass return to the homeland represented a potent societal myth in the mahjar, some Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian migrants did return to the Middle East as tourists, visitors and repatriates. During the Ottoman period, Arab subjects encountered few problems in returning to their home villages, and circular labour migration was a typical configuration. According to Kemal Karpat (1985, p. 186), the Ottoman government’s ‘basic policy was to allow unlimited freedom of return to all Ottoman subjects, present and former, with no discrimination on the basis of race’. Despite moments of reversal, the empire tended to view repatriation with favour. Both the Hamidian state and the constitutionalist government which followed it funded repatriation campaigns, designed to entice emigrants to invest their earnings in Ottoman industries. Following the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, the Committee
of Union and Progress (CUP) government opened new consulates in the United States, Brazil and Argentina to reach Ottomans abroad (Klich, 1993; Hyland, 2011). From those consulates, the government announced a general amnesty for all migrants accused of political crimes, hoping to appeal to Armenians and Arabs in exile.

For the Ottomans, Arab return migration was desirable, but continuing emigration abroad was also the cause of official anxiety. Ottoman law prohibited permanent emigration and expressly forbade expatriation (naturalisation in another country of domicile). Nevertheless, Arab migrants used the internal Ottoman passport (the mürur tezkeresi) to travel beyond the empire, and it was widely accepted by immigration authorities at Mediterranean and Atlantic ports (Karpat, 1985, p. 187; Gutman, 2012, pp. 62–66). Ottoman officials worried about the departure of men of conscription age, prompting them to intensify passenger traffic controls through the port of Beirut 1909 and 1913 (Akarli, 1992, p. 110). The CUP also attempted to limit access to travel certificates, and prosecuted agents discovered to have assisted unauthorised migrant departures.

Until the First World War, Ottoman policy towards the mahjar remained focused on its economic capacity, encouraging remittances and investment in the homeland. After 1914, Istanbul disengaged with the Americas, closing the empire’s consulates, censoring the press and prosecuting émigrés for political crimes. The allies responded by placing Ottoman immigrant communities under close surveillance and restricting their movement across borders. The United States, for instance, imposed a travel ban on Ottoman nationals living in American territories in 1918. Purportedly to protect US war interests, the 1918 Travel Control Act prohibited both arrivals and departures of Ottoman passport holders through US borders, prompting a number of Syrian and Lebanese merchants to seek diplomatic protection and travel passes from the French Foreign Ministry (Fahrenthold, 2019, pp. 115–122).

The Travel Control Act also standardised passport controls in a new way, transforming the passport into the primary means of migration regulation. At the same time, passports assumed new provenance as systems of verifying individual identity, categorising migrant flows and regulating rights of nationality. For Middle Eastern migrants, these processes operated in concert with events that shaped the post-Ottoman eastern Mediterranean: the Paris Peace Conference, the emergence of the League of Nations and its mandates in the region. The resumption of passenger transit in the eastern Mediterranean encouraged a burst of new migration in all directions: across the mahjar and between the homeland and its diasporas. Emigration from Syria, Mount Lebanon and Palestine swiftly resumed at levels that surpassed the peaks of the prewar moment (Hourani, 1992, pp. 4–5), raising concerns for the European officials then managing these territories.

On the other hand, emigrants who spent the war abroad also began to return home, hastened by the need to tend to properties or claim nationality status after the Ottoman Empire’s disintegration. Historians have recorded return migration patterns of former Ottoman Kurds, Armenians, and Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian Arabs at varying rates. The highest rates of return seem to be to the new state of Greater Lebanon, created in 1920; there, estimates range from 25 to 45 per cent of all emigrants who departed prior to 1914 ultimately returning during the interwar period (Hashimoto, 1992, p. 87; Khater, 2001, pp. 110–114). This rate of return is slightly higher than European averages but was by no means exceptional; scholars mapping the return of Turkish migrants, for instance, cite rates as high as 90 per cent (Acehan, 2009, p. 21).

Even in periods of heightened return migration, however, new waves of emigration tempered the absolute numbers of returnees. From 1926 to 1933, for instance, new emigrant departures outpaced return migration at a ratio of 2 to 1 (Himadeh, 1936, p. 20). This circulation impacted local cultures in the Mashriq. A Brazilian priest visiting Lebanon in 1925 discovered Portuguese
speakers in Zahle (Lesser, 1996, p. 54). In the late 1930s, Syria became the top importer of Argentinian yerba mate outside Latin America, driven by returning émigré businesses (Folch, 2010, pp. 26–27). Repatriates to Mount Lebanon brought their red-tile roofs and bourgeois social expectations with them, reshaping the middle class by the mid-century (Khater, 2001, pp. 108–145). In sum, the interwar mahjar was conditioned by the continuous circulation of people, goods and ideas, not by the singular experience of migration to America. Likewise, when repatriates returned to their towns and villages of origin, they brought the mahjar with them: social capital, consumer items, ideas and prejudices, new idioms or hybrid cultural norms.

The mandates also redefined sovereignty in important ways, influencing who had access to repatriation and under what terms. Syria, Lebanon and Palestine each emerged after 1920 within territorially defined borders drawn by their mandatories, France and Great Britain. In all three places, European administrators fixated on territorial borders as assumed sovereign containers for exclusive, distinct nationalities; such assumptions were instantly challenged by the realities of international migration, the presence of refugees, cross-border transhumance and diasporic claims-making. Similarly, both the French and British were engaged in refugee resettlement programmes, and these programmes encoded the mandates’ population policies and stance towards repatriates from abroad (Robson, 2017, pp. 35–64; White, 2017). French policies governing migrant repatriation from the Americas, for instance, emerged alongside a concurrent programme to resettle 150,000 Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon (Issawi, 1982, p. 78). In a 1924 report to the League of Nations, the French connected the Armenian relocation to uncontrolled Lebanese emigration:

they [the Armenians] will contribute a necessary artisan class to Syria and Lebanon, skilled in the trades, and by default they will compensate for the rarefaction of labour, itself a consequence of the traditional emigration of Lebanese to the Americas.

(Ministère des Affaires Étrangères 1925, p. 52)

However, even as mandate authorities shared concerns about the impact of migration on the region and contemplated possibilities for migrant repatriation from the mahjar, interwar policies governing migrant rights produced distinct, contradictory results. In Lebanon, the French encouraged selective repatriation of Lebanese Christians from the Americas, creating a system of travel passes to incentivise return migration. In Syria, by contrast, the French were consumed with ongoing anticolonial insurgencies and sought to cut ties with Syrian emigrants instead. In Palestine, the British emphasised policing the mandate’s territorial borders, leaving the encounter, screening and detention of migrants up to border guards, with unpredictable results.

In Lebanon, the French Mandate extended some rights of travel, repatriation and nationality to Lebanese emigrants seeking to return home. In a marked departure from state impulses towards other emigrants, French authorities in Beirut imagined the diaspora as a source of needed political legitimacy, leading to the inclusion of 130,000 Lebanese domiciled abroad in Lebanon’s first national census in 1921 (they were counted again in 1932). The inclusion of emigrants from the majority-Christian diaspora bolstered the High Commissioner’s claims to Greater Lebanon as a Christian-majority state. The diaspora’s demography, moreover, influenced the apportionment of seats in Lebanon’s representative council and underpinned its confessional system of governance. The French allowed Lebanese emigrants the right to vote in Lebanese elections, but only if they returned to their villages of origin to do so (Hashimoto, 1992, p. 79; Maktabi, 1999, p. 241). The sectarian system of government the French constructed in Lebanon depended on the active maintenance of confessional demography, prompting them to encourage selective repatriation. Returning emigrants were granted
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a means of securing Lebanese nationality in the 1925 Nationality Code, for instance, and the French instituted consular offices to reach Syrian and Lebanese communities abroad (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, 1925, pp. 52–53). At those consulates, officials exercised considerable latitude in vetting emigrant passport applications. Lebanese émigrés protested that consular staff rejected their applications on political bases (Fahrenthold, 2019, pp. 157–158).

In Syria, the French were disinterested in emigrant repatriation, and Syrians abroad experienced more trouble travelling to Syria than did their Lebanese counterparts. Continuing anticolonial activism in the Americas led the French to view the Syrian mahjar as a political threat. French authorities were alarmed by the possibilities for diasporic material support for armed insurrection, an anxiety that deepened during the 1925–1927 Great Syrian Revolt (Bailony, 2018). When the former Ottoman consul of Buenos Aires, Amin Arslan, condemned French imperialism following the mandate’s 1925 bombardment of Damascus, the city’s consulate threatened to retract the right of migrants in Argentina to claim Syrian nationality entirely. A crisis ensued and mandate officials backed down, but by 1928, fewer than 10 per cent of Argentina’s Syrian immigrants had achieved recognition of any kind (Narbona, 2007, p. 137). In sum, the French treated Lebanese and Syrian emigrants in divergent ways, a politics tied to the mandate’s dependence on Lebanese emigrants as a source of legitimacy.

In Palestine, the British Mandate was disinterested in facilitating Arab return migration from the Americas and in most cases expressly prohibited it. Instead, the colonial authorities invested in the affixing of territorial borders and the creation of complex, shifting and bureaucratically opaque border controls designed to make permanent repatriation difficult. Palestinian Arabs both at home and abroad remained formal Ottoman subjects until 1923. In the absence of a nationality law, ambiguity presided over the theoretical right of Palestinian emigrants to return home. Lauren Banko (2016) argues that British officials in Jerusalem exercised an incredible amount of latitude in determining repatriation cases, often refusing to issue passports and visas to Palestinians, some of whom subsequently applied for French passports to Syria. As in the French Mandate, the Treaty of Lausanne offered international recognition of Palestinian emigrants to a post-Ottoman nationality, theoretically opening a window for emigrants from Palestine to return and opt for Palestinian nationality. In 1925, Palestine’s Citizenship Order-in-Council was passed, restricting repatriation rights to those born in Palestine (excluding children born abroad), and requiring migrants to hasten their return, meet a six-month residency requirement and claim nationality before July 1926 (Banko, 2012, p. 653). Palestinians in the Americas continued to petition for the right to return after 1926, but the British Mandate was committed to refusing migrant repatriation applications (Bawalsa, 2015, pp. 126–127). This left Palestinians abroad in an awkward legal space as neither British protected persons, nor non-Jewish citizens of Palestine, nor citizens of their countries of domicile.

Despite these bureaucratic obstacles, many migrants did return. Estimates about the scope of return migration vary in the scholarship, maintaining that 20–45 per cent of emigrants from the mahjar returned between 1920 and 1946. Higher rates of return to Lebanon are reported than to Syria or Palestine, although Lebanon continued to experience higher rates of new emigration. Though return migration and circulation were constant features of the Mandate Period, two spikes also occurred: a wave of repatriations in the months following the 1918 armistice, and a second increase accompanying the global recession in the early 1930s.

Conclusion

The 1920s were defined by a mood of mounting hostility towards Middle Eastern immigrants. In addition to quota restrictions, popular xenophobia, and the fixation on deportation and
‘public charge’ legislation in the Americas, the European mandatory states installed in the Middle East after the Ottoman Empire’s collapse also favoured the restriction of return migration. This climate of migration restriction pushed against the desires of Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian Arab migrants seeking permanent repatriation in the region. Whereas the Turkish Republic oversaw the repatriation of Turkish emigrants from the Americas through the 1920s (Acehan, 2009), rates of Arab return migration increased later in the decade as America’s heavy industries faltered. Between 1926 and 1929, for instance, the US textile industry went bust: factories in Lowell, Lawrence, Fall River and New York City closed their doors on immigrant workers, and larger firms moved operations to Latin America in pursuit of cheaper labour (Chomsky, 2008). Some Arab workers followed the industry south, relocating from the United States to the Syrian colonies of São Paulo or Ypiranga, Brazil; to Buenos Aires and Rosario, Argentina; to Santiago, Chile; or elsewhere. Unemployed men also sought repatriation to the Middle East, looking for better economic conditions at home. Contrary to pervasive assumptions that the mahjar was a place of economic opportunity and the chance to find one’s fortune, many workers discovered that the diaspora offered them only bare existence, a structurally precarious position they alleviated by travelling back home. Returnees in the Mashriq ran the socio-economic gamut, from the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie whose red-roofed houses dotted Mount Lebanon to the compassionate repatriation of unemployed or disabled Arab workers rejoining their natal families. These patterns intensified during the Great Depression in the early 1930s, as unemployed workers applied for private welfare to pay for steamship tickets to the Middle East. In 1933–1934, joblessness, homelessness, and privation dogged urban Syrian neighbourhoods in New York, New England, and elsewhere, prompting a reversal of the same economic patterns that had motivated outmigration four decades earlier. Unemployed and impoverished workers depended on mutual aid societies and philanthropic organisations to assist in repatriation. In Mexico, Camila Pastor reveals a complex system of public-private partnerships between immigrant aid organisations and French consular authorities; to compel the French Mandate to accept Lebanese repatriates, their return had to be understood as a benevolent resolution to genuine economic misfortune beyond the migrants’ control (Pastor, 2017, pp. 96–98). In Boston, a similar set of connections between American social workers, the Red Cross, and immigrant charities like the Syrian Lebanese Ladies Aid Society negotiated return passage for destitute, disabled or aged workers to Lebanon and Palestine (Shakir, 1987, pp. 133–135). In all cases, repatriation represented a safety valve, an escape from the structural precarity of the Depression-era mahjar. At the same time, however, critics of repatriation worried that planning the departure of economically marginalised immigrants might undermine the right of the larger Arab American community to remain. In the context of US debates over public charge deportations involving Mexican, Chinese and other workers in the 1930s, such anxieties were understandable (Hester, 2017, pp.141–169).

Though precise statistics concerning the rates of repatriation from the Arabic-speaking mahjar have been elusive, there is abundant room for new research into return migration to the Middle East from this diaspora. Framing diaspora alongside other meso-level networks maintained by migrant communities across oceans and continents, this chapter suggests that examining return as a diasporic fixation, as a political ideology, and as a practical reality for many Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian emigrants creates opportunities for thinking about the diaspora’s impact on the modern Middle East. New methodologies in social history will also lend significant support for scholars pursuing these questions, especially methods drawing on migrant correspondence, the ethnic press and the travel regimes (passports, port records, immigration control and border authorities) that Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians confronted as they moved around the world.
Finally, the creative and rich borderlands literature in American and Latin American contexts offers a model for thinking through return without dependence on formal archives. Among other boons for the field, a deeper engagement with return will unpack the pioneer bias within immigrant histories, stressing instead the circular migration, transnationalisation of families and civil society, and the continuities that emigrants maintain with their places of origin. Perhaps most compellingly, a focus on return migration might reframe what historians often assume about emigration in the first place: the notion that diasporas represent spaces of comparative wealth, economic liberty and enhanced social mobility. Such rosy pictures of life abroad are themselves part of an immigration mythology that contrasts against the precarity, privation and legal proscription that emigrants often experience.

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Stacy D. Fahrenthold


'Return migration and repatriation'


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