

**LILY PEARL BALLOFFET, *Argentina in the Global Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020). Pp. 248. \$90.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper. ISBN 9781503611740.**

REVIEWED BY CHRISTINA CIVANTOS, Professor,  
Department of Modern Languages & Literatures, University of  
Miami, email: [ccivantos@miami.edu](mailto:ccivantos@miami.edu)



*Argentina in the Global Middle East* is an insightful interdisciplinary study that models the reconceptualization of migrant histories along the lines of a movement through space that is “continuous and connective” (4). More specifically, this book contributes to the shift beyond traditional frameworks focused on the one-way trajectory from sending country to receiving country, and instead centers on how the movement back and forth between those two points and within the receiving country are ongoing and constitutive of human experience. Balloffet draws from extensive archival work and interviews, and interprets these sources in a new light, one that foregrounds the mobility inherent in all steps and aspects—from livelihood to identity—of the Arab *mahjar* experience in Argentina. This approach yields various benefits, among them the establishment of the robust and ongoing circulation between the urban center of the capital, Buenos Aires, and various nodes in the interior of the country. Additionally, this approach highlights the broad reach of migrants’ activities, which went far beyond national borders and the institutionally defined areas of the Middle East and Latin America to create networks between various locations in the Middle East and the Americas. The array of maps included in the book, which chart the railway system, immigrant associations, and producers of culture, support these points and demonstrate the centrality of mobility. For these reasons, Balloffet’s book is a significant contribution to the emerging conceptualization of a “Global Middle East.”<sup>1</sup> In tandem, this monograph adds to discussions of how best to conceptualize the Global South.

My only critique regarding the conceptualization of the project is the uneasy place of the concept of “diaspora” within it. In the introduction, Balloffet explains why she intentionally avoids the concept of diaspora:

For the sake of thinking beyond traditionally bounded world regions, this study avoids engaging the idea of diaspora as a fixed yardstick against which to measure the habits of Middle Eastern migrants and their descendants in Argentina. Rather than a theoretical framework, it is most useful in the context of Argentine-Middle East relations to speak of diaspora in a geospatial sense (7).

In my view, the reasons for not engaging with the concept remain opaque. Diaspora is not usually considered a “fixed yardstick,” but rather is associated with a more fluid dispersal, albeit one that doesn’t follow specific flows or logics, such as those of railroad lines and the yerba mate trade (two types of movement that Balloffet astutely underscores). If the study had delved further into the concept of diaspora, it may have arrived at additional theoretical support for the kind of mobility framework that it espouses. Nevertheless, *Argentina in the Global Middle East* is a pioneering work that enriches the specific fields of Arab migration studies and global Middle Eastern studies, and the broader fields of migration studies and Latin American studies.

Chapter one correlates the mobility of the Arab migrant population to the history of the railroad in Argentina. The chapter demonstrates that the boom in transportation technology was simultaneous with the arrival of international migration and allowed Arab migrants, many of whom were itinerant merchants, to reach the far corners of Argentina in patterns of movement that mirrored the railroad lines. This analysis establishes a model for understanding the patterns of settlement and contact among Arab migrants.

Chapter two focuses on the Arab Argentine ethnic press and its links to the mobility structured by the rail lines in order to establish the histories of some of the remote nodes of Arab immigrant activity, far from Buenos Aires. By focusing on a few key figures from the Arab Argentine immigrant press, the chapter establishes that, among these migrants, mobility was a way of life. However, more attention to the Arabic-language *mahjar* press would have strengthened the arguments.

Chapter three focuses on migrants who were active as producers of culture whether in film, popular entertainment, or literature. The professional lives of these migrants who were active in the arts again highlight the creation of networks across various regions. Moreover, the chapter demonstrates ways in which motion was a central theme within many of their artistic and cultural productions. Balloffet notes the migrants' concerns with the creation of a positive self-image for mainstream Latin American consumption, the maintenance of the Arabic language in the diaspora, and, intertwined with these, the delineation of their cultural identities. Given the focus on these topics, more substantive engagement with existing scholarship on the Arab community in Argentina would have added greater depth.<sup>2</sup> Chapter four centers on Arab Argentine beneficence organizations and the role of women in these institutions in order to demonstrate further links between rural and urban spheres as well as the ways in which women became social actors in the diaspora. Balloffet convincingly argues that, as in other spheres of diaspora life, philanthropic organizations created networks that surpassed national and regional boundaries. Additionally, her research suggests that, through their philanthropic work, women were able to take active political roles.

Chapter five follows up on the theme of South-South connections brought up in the preceding chapter by focusing on the specific case of Argentine-Egyptian relations in the context of the Cold War and specifically the era of the 1952 Egyptian Revolution. Balloffet demonstrates that the Levantine Arab diaspora had a prominent role in Argentine-Egyptian relations and the efforts at forging alliances parallel to, though not within, the Non-Aligned Movement. This chapter, with its revelations about the communications between Perón and Nasser, and the role of Levantine Arab immigrants in Argentina's anti-imperialism activities, as translators, interpreters, authors, and government advisors, is particularly innovative.

Chapter six points to three other types of connections between Argentina and the Middle East that are worthy of further exploration: Argentina's exportation of the herbal drink yerba mate to Syria, Argentina's program for receiving refugees from the Syrian Civil War, and collaborations between Argentina and the Middle East through film and other cultural activities. Balloffet demonstrates that in each of these arenas of interaction, and at multiple levels within them, Arab Argentines played—and often continue to play—a central role. The chapter is successful in pointing out the richness of interactions

between Argentina and the Middle East and the pivotal role that Arab Argentines have played in these interconnections, thereby not only further supporting the overarching arguments of the book, but also pointing to areas ripe for future research.

Overall, *Argentina in the Global Middle East* convincingly argues that Argentina has had a central role in Middle Eastern culture and politics and that Arab migrants have been protagonists in this transatlantic relationship. This book is an innovative and productive contribution to Arab diaspora studies, global Middle Eastern studies, and more broadly to migration studies and Latin American studies. I highly recommend it to readers in any of these fields.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Argentina in the Global Middle East* complements recent works in this emerging field: Camila Pastor, *The Mexican Mahjar: Transnational Maronites, Jews, and Arabs Under the French Mandate* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Steven Hyland, *More Argentine Than You: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants in Argentina* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017); Stacy Fahrenthold, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); and John Tofik Karam, *Manifold Destiny: Arabs at an American Crossroads of Exceptional Rule* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> For example, more in-depth dialogue with the works that Balloffet cites, such as Civantos, *Between Argentines and Arabs: Argentine Orientalism, Arab Immigrants, and the Writing of Identity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006) and Hyland, *More Argentine Than You: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants in Argentina* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017, and some reference to María del Mar Logroño Narbona, *The Development of Nationalist Identities in French Syria and Lebanon: A Transnational Dialogue with Arab Immigrants to Argentina and Brazil, 1915–1929* (Santa Barbara: University of California, Santa Barbara, 2007); and to Sylvia Montenegro, “Alawi Muslims in Argentina: Religious and Political Identity in the Diaspora,” *Contemporary Islam* 12, no. 1 (April 2018): 23–38.