

**VIOLA RAHEB, ed., *Latin Americans with Palestinian Roots* (Beit Lahem and New York: Diyar Publishers and Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2012). Pp. 118. \$13.86 paper. ISBN 9781478389613.**

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This short book of essays—five in total—amounting to eighty-one pages of text, seeks to address the following critical questions: “What role did religion take in the self-understanding of the Palestinian Diaspora in Latin America? Was it just one component of their identity, or did it play a significant role in developing their new diasporic identity? How did their Christian identity develop in the new country? How did the religious mobility influence their identity? To what extent does the migration process change religious traditions and practices? How does religion influence the process of migration and social integration for assimilation?” These are questions posed in the introductory essay by Viola Raheb, a Palestinian Lutheran theologian and educator trained in Germany, and working in Palestine.

The key notion in these questions is “religion.” The back cover of the book summarizes the problematic that presumably unites the five essays: “While ethnicity and culture have been discussed when addressing the Palestinian Diaspora in Latin America, the aspect of religion has been almost absent when addressing the experience of the Christian Palestinian Diaspora in Latin America.” As an integrated whole, sadly, the essays fail to seriously and systematically engage, for an academic audience, not only the fascinating topic of its title, but to systematically address its key objectives. This is unfortunate because, as it is often recognized in this text, the current population of Palestinian Latin Americans, mostly in Central America, especially in Honduras, and in Chile—between 100,000 and 200,000 in the latter country—represents the “biggest” Palestinian Diaspora outside of the Arab world, nearly 500,000 total in the Americas. A range of reasons explains the fact that the essays in this book do not offer sustained and

sophisticated answers to the questions cited when viewed from an academic perspective, especially for specialists steeped in long established Latin American Studies traditions, particularly history, and anthropology, and within the latter, in the subfields of religion and the ethnography of kinship.

On the other hand, the book's main audience is not Latin Americanists or even academics. The book was published to be read in Palestine, by an educated general public. In fact, this book's general objective, made amply manifest in the introductory essay by its editor, is to provide a kind of primer, in "a first step for the dwindling Christian Palestinian community in Palestine to rediscover and reconnect with their sisters and brothers in the Diaspora." The Forward by the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, President of the book's publisher, reiterates this point, declaring, "it is our hope that through this publication [we activate] the networking capacity of the Palestinian roots, with special focus on Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Chile." The essays generally register statements and data that will contribute to this goal; however, in the process the scholarly basis and rendition of answers to the questions posed by Viola Raheb are most often only superficially addressed with archival and/or ethnographic research familiar with the region's historiography.

As separate essays, especially for non-specialists, these contributions are often insightful and mostly informative, particularly those by Roberto Marín-Guzmán and Manzar Foroohar. The data and arguments in the essays by Marín-Guzmán and Foroohar are far better presented in prior publications on which their current essays are grounded, especially in books and articles by Marín-Guzmán. In the editions in this book the detailed registry in the endnotes of the many, many interviews that they carried out represent a methodological innovation unique to these authors when addressing the historiography and contemporary situation of Arab Palestinian migrations in Central America between the mid-nineteenth century and the last forty years. Indeed, one of the shortcomings of my more than twenty-five years of research in the ethnohistory of Honduras has been never interviewing a compatriot of Arab-Palestinian descent.

Despite the great number of interviews referenced, largely from the mid-1990s, some from the last decade, mostly by Marín-Guzmán, these rich resources are not complemented by a deep and sophisticated knowledge of Central American and Chilean historiography, necessary to fully engage the questions posed by the editor at the book's

beginning. Only two of the essayists in this book are trained historians; however, these enjoy only a tangential expertise in Central American historical and anthropological contexts, especially given concerns with migrations, post-colonialism, ethnohistory, national identities and *mestizaje* in the region. Marín-Guzmán, who earned a PhD in Middle Eastern History and Islamic Studies from the University of Texas-Austin, is the author in this book most versed in Central American history, and in the Mexican context; but, he has largely devoted his scholarship to Islamic Spain and the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East.

Foroohar, with a BA in political science from the National University of Iran and a PhD from UCLA, has largely done work in Nicaragua; an earlier rendition of her article for this book, published in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*,<sup>1</sup> is much more polished. The co-authors of the essay on Chile, Nicole Saffie Guevara and Lorenzo Agar, both Chileans, the former a political scientist, the latter a sociologist, are versed on the Palestinian migrations to Chile, its general and current public policy implications there, and also in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Their essay will spark interest among Palestinians in the Middle East. However, it will not be considered an important contribution among specialists given that it lacks historical and anthropological sensibilities, and serious engagement with the sociology of religion in the Americas.

There are many ways to illustrate the problematic analyses and statements from each of the essays given their overall lack of grounding in a comprehensive understanding of Central America's historiography, and, for that matter, Chile's as well. Give space limitations in a book review, I highlight one example that draws on my consideration of one of the central themes mentioned by all essayists: the degree to which "integration" of different generations of Palestinians into the Americas has led to "assimilation," social and cultural. I will focus on the Honduran case, not only because I have researched it for years in the context of various books on nineteenth and twentieth history in general and ethnohistory in particular, but also because, Raheb notes, the "highest percentage" of Palestinian descendants of a national total population is registered in this country, even when Chile harbors a larger, absolute number.

Both Marín-Guzmán and Foroohar argue that economic integration in Honduras has led to significant political participation, especially at the executive level, and also to social integration, usually taking greater and greater numbers of inter-marriage with non-Arab

Palestinians among the third and fourth generations of descendants. However, what the authors do not analyze is that economic integration and marriage integration is limited mostly to upper-middle class segments of the Palestinian Diaspora and old, Honduran mestizo families, and very often at the highest level of the capitalist class in a now globalized economy. (Ferozohar gives this matter some slight consideration, and she draws on my research to ground her statements, although she does so more systematically in her article in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*.)

Since neither author is versed in the ethnohistory of Honduras or Central America, even when acknowledging in endnotes and in the bibliography key works on Honduras, including some of mine, they thus vastly overestimate the degree of cultural and social assimilation beyond upper-crust elite circles, including among the third and fourth generations. No wonder that none of the authors engage the dramatic xenophobia and racism faced by the Palestinian Diaspora in Honduras when President Manuel Zelaya was deposed in a military coup in June 2009. I personally witnessed these events and processes, and I am writing an analysis of them based on those experiences and my historical research on the Arab-Palestinian presence in Honduras since the mid-1980s. My sense is that neither Marín-Guzmán nor Ferozohar address the 2009 coup and these matters because they have largely understudied the history of class structures in Central America, at least the serious historiography it has enjoyed now for decades. Marín-Guzmán and Ferozohar would have benefitted from the historical and ethnographic sensitivity available in Camila Pastor's "Lo arabe y su doble: imaginarios de principios de siglo en Mexico y Honduras."<sup>2</sup>

My view is that in the case of Honduras, the 2009 coup was organized by new generations of transformed and emergent elites.<sup>3</sup> In particular, but not only, key organizers of the 2009 coup came from Honduran-Arab elites – mostly of Palestinian descent – not integrated into the non-elite political culture of the country, unique in Central America. In graffiti and publications and on the internet, resistance to the coup, massive and largely non-elite, consistently characterized public figures of these families as "los turcos" and thus anti-Honduran and exploitative of the mixed-race majority population of the country – the mestizos. In the more polemical and incendiary of the publications, printed and in the social media, elite Hondurans of Arab or Jewish descent were treated to vicious and crude racism and xenophobia, also evident in graffiti-sprayed walls in Tegucigalpa and

in San Pedro Sula, the country's largest cities. I have a large electronic archive of these images. Surely Marín-Guzmán and Foroohar are aware of these events, and their implications for the integration-assimilation problematic.

While I do not know the Chilean historiography and ethnography as I do their Central American counterparts, it might be the case that Saffie Guevara and Agar's analysis suffer the same problems found in those by Marín-Guzmán and Agar. More than twenty-five years ago, Peter Winn, historian of Chile, published an extraordinary monograph entitled, *Weavers of Revolution: The Yarur Workers and Chile's Road to Socialism*.<sup>4</sup> It detailed the fortunes misfortunes, and regained fortunes of the descendants of Juan Yarur (1896–1954), perhaps the most prominent member of the first generations of the Palestinian Diaspora in Chile. By the time of the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende, the Yarurs and their fortunes were well integrated into the highest echelons of the industrial segment of Chile's capitalist class. The Yarur textile factory became a key target of nationalization initiatives under the Allende government. It was nationalized from below, by its workers, as Winn brilliantly showed.

The dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet returned the textile factory to the Yarurs of the second and third generations. While Saffie Guevara and Agar recognize the economic power of the Yarurs between the 1930s and now, its conflictual and segregated class dimensions vis-a-vis the majority of Chileans is not mentioned, to say nothing of its ethnic dimensions. Rather, Saffie Guevara and Agar offer the high levels of the number of marriages between the elite of the last two generations of the Palestinian Diaspora and the descendants of Chile's old elites as evidence of "assimilation," bereft of serious historical and ethnographic context. Without this, as in the case of the essays on Central America, *Latin Americans with Palestinian Roots* offers its intended audience a superficial set of answers to the critical questions its editor seeks to address.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Manzar Foroohar, "Palestinians in Central America: From Temporary Emigrants to a Permanent Diaspora," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 40, no. 3 (2011), 6–22.

<sup>2</sup> Camila Pastor, "Lo arabe y su doble: imaginarios de principios de siglo en Mexico y Honduras," *Contribuciones árabes a las identidades iberoamericanas*,

Karim Hauser y Daniel Gil, Editores (Madrid: Casa Árabe-IEAM, 2009), 287–347.

<sup>3</sup> Details of the work mentioned here are part of my article in a forthcoming edited volume on the “Reconfiguration of Elites and the Exercise of Power in Central America,” organized by American University’s Center for Latin American & Latino Studies.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Winn, *Weavers of Revolution: The Yarur Workers and Chile’s Road to Socialism* (Oxford University Press, 1986).