Turcofobia Salvadoreña: Anti-Palestinian Discrimination in El Salvador's Mestizo Nationalist Era, 1920-1944

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"The Palestinian is Salvadoran; he is totally integrated into this country with love. It shows where[ever] he is. It shows that he is in commercial life, industrial, intellectual, in the army, there are [our] people; in every way, we are [Salvadoran]."[1]

The history of the Palestinian diaspora largely focused on the forced migration of people following the Israeli ethnic cleansing of Palestine during and following the Nakba (1948) and the Six Days War (1967), relegating the older and sizable Christian Bethlehemite diaspora across Latin America to the margins of historical discussion. Likewise, in the field of Latin American studies, the Palestinian diaspora is largely ignored outside of Chile and Honduras, the first and second largest locations of Palestinian settlement in Latin America. The third-largest Latin American Palestinian diaspora of El Salvador has largely been ignored in English-language literature. Even amongst Spanish-language research, the Salvadoran Palestinian diaspora only recently received attention, with the Salvadoran Ministry of Culture in 2019 publishing the first full book exploring the history of the community. Despite the significant work done by anthropologists, historians, and the community itself to try and promote discussion of their unique history, the population is ignored in secondary literature focusing on Arab diaspora studies in Latin America. Primary sources, once recondite, are now plentiful, and complex research questions about the community can be fully explored.

Following the decline of the Ottoman Empire and poverty wrought by the First World War, the early 20th century saw scores of individuals emigrate from geographic Syria (today's Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon). Kemal Karpat estimates that from the 1860s to 1914 the region saw 600,000 people leave for the Americas.[2] With the development of coffee exportation and then the ensuing economic boom of El Salvador after the First World War, the country was

[1] Simán Khoury, *Personal interview* by Melissa Rivas Montoya (22 March 2019), San Salvador.
[2] Kemal Karpat, "The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860-1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 2 (1985): 185.

seen as a profitable location for immigration. As far as oral histories detail, the first Palestinian in El Salvador was Solomon Handal in 1898.[3] The Palestinian diaspora of El Salvador was already established around the year 1900, and the greatest period of Palestinian immigration to El Salvador was from 1910 to 1925 (with estimates on the number of Palestinian families being uncertain due to the lack of concrete records).[4]

The majority of Palestinian migration came from the region surrounding Bethlehem. The poverty of the late Ottoman reign, combined with the transnational stories of riches in America (without much specification as to which part), led Palestinians from Bethlehem to venture out to find the figurative "El Dorado."[5] International fairs in which Palestinians from Bethlehem sold Holy Land relics introduced the community to the New World. Bethlehemite-operated stands at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 and the Saint Louis World's Fair in 1904 appear in migrant testimonies as inciting the desire for immigration to the Americas.[6] For many, the journey to "Amreka" was romantic, as historian Jacob Norris details that "[it was] the story of young men setting off on the backs of donkeys with suitcases full of crosses and rosaries, returning a year later with those same suitcases stuffed with French francs, Philippine pesos, and Salvadoran colones."[7] Bethlehemites immigrated all across Latin America, hoping to find wealth by trading the aforementioned holy land relics, and then return home with their profits. From Colombia to Chile, from Brazil to Central America, the Palestinian community could be found during this time. Most Palestinians in the Latin American diaspora were transitory and intended to return

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[3] Manzar Foroohar, "Palestinians in Central America: From Temporary Emigrants to a Permanent Diaspora," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 3 (2011): 8.
[4] Roberto Marín-Guzmán, "Political Participation and Economic Success of the Palestinians of Christian Origin in Central America," in *Latin Americans with Palestinian Roots*, ed. Viola Raheb (Diyar Publisher, 2012), 32.
[5] Cecilia Baeza, "Palestinians in Latin America: Between Assimilation and Long-Distance Nationalism," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 43, no. 2 (2014): 60-1.
[6] Adnan A. Musallan, "The formative stages of Palestinian Arab immigration to Latin America and immigrants' quest for return and for Palestinian citizenship in the early 1920s," in *Latin Americans with Palestinian Roots*, ed. Viola Raheb (Diyar Publisher, 2012): 17.
[7] Jacob Norris, *The Lives and Deaths of Jabrail Dabdoub: Or, How the Bethlehemites Discovered Amerka* (2023): 1.

home. Still, in many instances, these migrants would come to lay down roots and set up new lives in their host countries. With the capital that these migrants earned and the transnational connections they established, the migrants became highly influential in developing 20th-century Latin American industry and commercial retail ventures. In El Salvador, Palestinian migrants took advantage of the retail and industrial deficiency in the country due to the local elite's reluctance to expand from plantation ownership into these avenues.[8] Because of these factors, the Palestinian population was dominant in the business-owning middle class of El Salvador.

Despite the influence of this community on Salvadoran history, the topic remains understudied today. The lack of research on this community is due to several factors. El Salvador is historically referred to as "The Mestizo Nation" for its almost complete miscegenation of pre-Columbian indigenous people and European conquerors/later immigrants.[9] However, this designation as a homogenized country caused scholars to overlook the interethnic cleavages within El Salvador's recent history. As a result, the country's Palestinian Arab population is relegated to the margins of discussion. This occultation of non-mestizo identities is not just a quirk of the field of Latin American studies discussing El Salvador, but was the result of the nationalist ideology that ruled Salvadoran intellectual thought at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

According to historian Jorge Cuéllar, "From the moment of independence from Spain in the 1820s, liberal Central America sought to establish the 'indohispanic' or 'mestizo' as integral to the project of nation-building."[10] This construction of the *mestizo* national character started to play a more crucial role between the 1920s-40s as Salvadoran politics shifted and the country

[8] Baeza, "Palestinians in Latin America," 60-1.
[9] Mestizo refers to a person descended from Spanish colonizers (or other white Europeans) and indigenous peoples of Latin America. Jan Suter, "'Pernicious Aliens' and the Mestizo Nation: Ethnicity and the Shaping of Collective Identities in El Salvador before the Second World War," *Immigrants & Minorities 20,* no. 2 (2001): 38-9.
[10] Jorge E. Cuéllar, "Elimination/Deracination: Colonial Terror, La Matanza, and the 1930s Race Laws in El Salvador," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 42 no. 2 (2018): 48.

modernized. During the Latin American economic boom, which lasted from the end of World War I to the Great Depression of 1929-30, El Salvador was transitioning from the regional quasi-feudal plantation society inherited from Spanish colonialism to a more national society and centralized state. As coffee production encouraged internal migration, new careers associated with industry developed, and an urban middle class emerged. At the same time, frictions began to develop which necessitated a new basis for defining intergroup relations.[11]

The goal of mestizo nationalism was to unite the growing mixed-race middle class with the white Spanish-descended elite and redefine what it meant to be "Salvadoran." Jan Suter stated that "establishment of a Salvadoran identity based on the society's presumed common cultural core tried to blur the ever-growing class cleavages developing with the modernization process and stressed common cultural traits of all genuine Salvadorans."[12] These common traits being, "mestizo, or mixed blood, symbolizing the synthesis of pre-Columbian Maya settlers and conquerors, [that] would henceforth represent the national identity."[13] This nationalism was based on a reinvigorated idea of mestizaje.[14] An aspect of mestizaje was deracination, or the elimination of ethnic identities to achieve the goal of a single shared mestizo identity.[15] An intentional effect of mestizaje was that indigenous and black people would be denied their claims to existence as separate ethnic identities as a part of this occultation of racial identities outside of the mestizo (except for the "superior" white identities).

Secondary literature exploring Salvadoran nationalism and discrimination within El Salvador mostly focuses on the indigenous population. This makes sense, as the indigenous, or

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[11] Suter, "'Pernicious Aliens' and the Mestizo Nation," 28.
[12] Ibid, 28.
[13] Ibid, 29.
[14] Mestizaje translates from Spanish as "miscegenation" and was used during Spanish colonialism as a term to refer to the mixture of Spanish conquerors and native women. At the beginning of the 20th century, this term reemerged as Latin American countries bagan to try and construct new national identities.
[15] Cuéllar, "Elimination/Deracination," 40.

indígenas, had traditionally been the subject of marginalization.[16] For the *criollo*[17] rulers and intellectuals of El Salvador, the indigenous population, its culture, and values were seen as backward. Therefore, mestizaje was a way to incorporate these societal cleavages into the path of perceived progress and civilization.[18] Salvadoran intellectual, politician, and anthropologist David J. Guzmán considered the ultimate outcome for indigenous Salvadorans to be "in the fusion of the Creole [white] race or with the Ladino [sic], and by following their forced incorporation into the grand civilizing movement of the century."[19] The erasure of the indigenous elements in El Salvador started with the appropriation of their communal lands between 1881 and 1882, and culminated in 1932 with *La Matanza* (the Massacre). Following a communist uprising in which several indigenous communities participated, dictator Máxamiliano Hérnandez Martinez ordered that anyone who appeared indigenous be killed. This order resulted in 10,000 to 40,000 indigenous people murdered over a few days by the ladino[20] civilian patrols and national guard. Facing this threat, the indigenous people hid their clothing, language, and customs for fear of being executed. Indigenous integration was desirable by the Salvadoran state, as the indígenas were central to the national mestizo character. However, their existence as a separate racial/ethnic category was unacceptable with homogenization as the nationalist goal.

European immigration was instead seen by the Salvadoran elite as the solution to the question of indigenous backwardness, as their growing numbers and intermixing with natives would "whiten" the country and set it on the path of "progress."[21] Luis Roniger explains that,

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[16] Not only the indigenous community, but also the Black heritage of Salvadorans that mestizaje intended to hide. Robin DeLugan, "Commemorating from the Margins of the Nation: El Salvador 1932, Indigeneity, and Transnational Belonging\," *Anthropological Quarterly* 86.4 (2013): 965-94.
[17] Criollo refers to people of white ancestry who had traditionally held power in El Salvador's elite circle. Originally descended from the white Spanish population that conquered El Salvador during colonization, the group came to include other white Europeans who came to El Salvador and married into this privileged racial class.
[18] Montoya, *La Diáspora Palestina*, (2019):103.
[19] Translated from Spanish by the author. David J. Guzmán, cited in Montoya, *La Diáspora Palestina*, 103.
[20] Ladino is used to refer to the mestizo middle class which identified with the nationalist movement.
[21] Montoya, 104.

beginning in the late 19th century, Salvadoran elites sought to construct a national identity rooted in "the complete miscegenation of the indigenous and immigrant populations," or *mestizaje*.[22] To achieve this process, El Salvador had a general open-doors policy when it came to immigration, even going so far as placing advertisements in the *New York Times* with the hope of attracting European immigrants from Ellis Island.[23] An unintended consequence of this open-doors policy was the arrival of Palestinians to the country, which comprised in certain years the largest plurality of immigrants.[24] Palestinians, as a group of ethnically distinct, non-European immigrants, would prove a contradiction to the idealized Salvadoran that the nationalist myth constructed. This ideal was a homogenous race descended from both pre-Columbian and Europeans, but not descended from Asians who were viewed as racially inferior.

Mestizaje was seen as progressive in the sense that it would eliminate societal cleavages such as class and race. Separate racial communities, in the elite's eyes, are a threat to the stability that homogeneity would bring. Yet, mestizo nationalism was not only focused on the creation of a "mixed-race" society, but at the same time emphasized a racial hierarchy that excluded non-European immigrants. Under the Martinez dictatorship, the *criollo* elites, influenced by social evolutionism, social hygiene, and the racialist ideas gaining ground in Western Europe, promoted ideas such as eugenics, the control of intermarriage, and immigration.[25] Martínez, who admired Hitler and Mussolini, banned the entry of Africans, Asians, Arabs, Romani people, and many others into the country.[26] Furthermore, white, Western Europeans were actively sought out to "improve" the Salvadoran lineage and 'whiten' the population.[27] As such, European immigrants arriving primarily from Germany and Italy to help industrialize El Salvador were not

[22] Luis Roniger, *Transnational Politics in Central America* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida: 2011), 74.
[23] Margoth Siman Jacir, *Una Mujer Llamada Natalia* (San Salvador: Minos Tercer Milenio, 2006): 9–18.
[24] Montoya, *La Diáspora Palestina*,61.
[25] Isabel Rosales, "Report on Citizenship Law: El Salvador," *EUDO Citizenship Observatory*, December 2015, 5.
[26] Luis Roniger, *Transnational Politics in Central America*, 74.
[27] Isabel Rosales, "Report on Citizenship Law: El Salvador," 5.

subject to the same othering and exclusion that Palestinians and other non-white races were subject to.[28] For the elites and the Salvadoran state, the demand for immigration stressed an "immigration of quality, not quantity" that had an ethnic connotation defined within a hierarchical system of "ethnic values," with whites at the top, Blacks at the bottom and Chinese and Arabs somewhere in the lower half of the scale."[29]

Turcophobia is an explanation for why Arabs specifically were not well received by the Salvadoran elite. Across secondary literature, the term *turcofobia* is used to describe the racist reactions that people across Latin America had towards Arabs and turco immigrants.[30] The term was first used by Antonia Rebolledo Hernández in her article *La 'Turcofobia', Discriminación Antiarabe En Chile, 1900-1950.*[31] In it, she explores the discrimination Arab immigrants arriving to Chile from Palestine. The term, in the words of Hagai Rubinstein, "well describes the perception of Arab immigrants in Chile."[32]

Anti-Arab sentiment likely originated in Orientalist depictions of the East inherited from European intellectual thought. Orientalism, which depicted Eastern peoples and cultures as inferior to the West and constructed them as the "other," was transferred over to the Latin

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[28] DeLugan, "Turcos and Chinos in El Salvador," 151.
[29] Suter, "'Pernicious Aliens' and the Mestizo Nation," 56
[30]The term "turco" is a regional term in Latin American that translates literally to "Turk" in English but is not to be confused with people who specifically originate from Turkey. Despite their name, few "turcos" come from Turkish descent. The term "turco" as it is used across Latin America refers to the people of Middle Eastern origin who emigrated there around the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. Most of these immigrants arrived from lands that were once ruled by the Ottoman Empire, and early immigrants carried Ottoman passports. Even after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the term "turco" was used across Latin America to refer to a variety of Middle Eastern and North African peoples such as Sephardic Jews from Morocco, Armenians from Cicilia, and Arabs from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Aaron Moore and Kent Mathewson, "Latin America's Los Turcos: Geographic Aspects of Levantine and Maghreb Diasporas," Nóesis: Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades 22 (2013): 292-3. In El Salvador, where the "turco" population was composed primarily of Palestinians, the term "turco" is essentially a synonym for the terms "Arab" or "Palestinian." The only essential difference is that the term is an exonym and not chosen by the community to whom the term was directed. The term is considered offensive today, with anthropologist Robin DeLugan sharing that one Salvadoran she had corresponded with stated to her, "Turcos can and will sell anything... even their mothers." This term is included in this paper only about the primary sources where the term "turco" appears. Robin DeLugan, "'Turcos' and 'Chinos'," 144, 158.
[31]Antonia Rebolledo Hernández, "La 'Turcofobia': Discriminación antiárabe en Chile," *Historia* 28 (1994): 249.
[32]Hagai Rubinstein, "Constructing a Transnational Identity: the Three Phases of Palestinian Immigration to Chile, 1900–1950," in *Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers in Latin America*, ed. Raanan Rein (Brill, 2020), 92.

American elite's understanding of arriving Arab immigrants. In the process of constructing new national identities, Heba El-Attar states that: "Latin American intellectuals and writers started invoking an image of the Orient in general, and the Arab Other in particular, to assert a civilized self in the face of an inferior and barbaric Other. An Orientalist discourse ensued and later increased with the influx of Middle Eastern immigrants flowing from the Ottoman Empire."[33] Systemic discrimination against Palestinian immigrants in El Salvador fits within a broader regional pattern of nationalist identity construction. By framing the "Arab Other" as a foil for Latin America's "civilized" self-image, post-independence elites weaponized Orientalist tropes to legitimize exclusionary nationalism. El-Attar further states that "Turcophobia—anti-Arab prejudice institutionalized by that discourse—arose as a fierce challenge to the assimilation and integration of Arab immigrants."[34] As was the case in Latin America generally, integration for Palestinian Arabs likewise was an issue in El Salvador for the elite.

This ideology, as a part of the nationalist process of identity construction, directly informed El Salvador's *turcophobia*, as the state and elites portrayed Palestinians (despite their Christian majority and economic contributions) as incompatible with the idealized mestizo nation. Exploring this even further, in the Salvadoran context specifically, Amy Fallas states: "While these migrants primarily hailed from Bethlehem, the land of Jesus' birth, associations with the 'Islamic' and 'Asiatic' Ottoman Empire entangled this community within discriminatory racial schemas that led to their marginalization."[35] The nationalist project depended on these inferior views of the Oriental "other" in its construction of the Salvadoran national identity. The national identity exists as an opposition to this barbaric characteristic of the East. The commonly

[33] Heba El Attar. "Turcophobia or Turcophilia: Politics of Representing Arabs in Latin America," in *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora*, ed. Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat (University of Michigan Press, 2013): 252.
[34] Ibid, 252.
[35] Amy Fallas, "The Power of El Salvador's Palestinian Diaspora," *Institute for Palestine Studies, Palestine Square* (blog), January 22 2023, https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1653586

used exonym of “turcos” invokes these same orientalist imaginations by fitting Palestinian Arabs into a generalized idea of an “oriental.”

The question this research aims to answer is: how did nationalist-inspired, turcophobic discrimination manifest against Palestinian migrants during the Salvadoran nationalist era and what were some of the migrants’ reaction? Other academics studied specific measures of discrimination or the integration of the Palestinian community into Salvadoran society. I want to try and bridge the gap by exploring the role in which discrimination hastened the integration of this community.

Historians have varying definitions and interpretations about the nature of the discrimination that Palestinians faced during the early 20th century. It is important to note that the arguments historians made regarding Palestinian discrimination in El Salvador did not transform linearly with time, but it appears that the debate is still ongoing. Though the sources will be presented in chronological order, it is obvious that the consensus has not evolved linearly. With how understudied this population is, large parts of certain studies must be completely discounted as later research elicits facts that were once not there. It is not possible to place these studies into specific camps as there is no firmly established discourse in the field.

Jan Suter argues that the sentiment bred during the mestizo nationalist era influenced policy decisions regarding non-white immigrants.[36] His study focuses specifically on Chinese and Arab immigrants in El Salvador before the Second World War, and outlines the development of mestizo nationalism, connecting it to the othering of non-white immigrants. His research explores “the [Salvadoran] state’s role as both mediator and articulator of popular opposition against the immigrants, and also as a populist profiteer of their presence.” Despite the role that the state had in discriminating against the migrants, he dismisses the 1933 Ley de Extranjera,

[36] Suter, “‘Pernicious Aliens’” 27.

which banned Palestinians from migrating to the country as a "quirk" instead of being an example of discrimination based upon ethnicity.

In regards to integration, he states that "after the anti-immigrant campaign and the massacre of 1932, the Arabs came to be regarded as an in-group [to acceptable Salvadoran society]. They were never accepted as a distinct ethnic group within society, but they were tacitly accepted as a segment of which society permitted."[37] Expanding further, he states: "members of both groups shared an attitude that would lead to integration as the ideal form of establishing a stable relationship with the surrounding society without losing their own culture." In this sense, Arab integration was pursued by the community as a way of forming a stable relationship with the hostile society surrounding them.

Despite these conclusions, Suter's study is stymied by several issues. Whilst focusing on "Arab" migrants, he does not highlight specifically their Palestinian identity or individual details of their discrimination. Many of his claims, such as that the immigrants were not seekers of fortune, were forced out of their homelands, and were majority Lebanese and Syrian do not correspond to facts that future researchers uncover. His research contains a methodological problem due to his lack of migrant accounts.[38] As such, his research focuses almost entirely on officially published documents. Individual perspectives of Palestinians in the community may have altered his conclusions, especially his conclusion of the migrants being "tacitly accepted."

Despite these discrepancies in Suter's research, as well as several missing citations for several of his claims, the connection he makes between the mestizo nationalist movement, discriminatory policies against Arab immigrants, and their integration is valuable to this current study. However, with the resounding flaws and lack of Palestinian community-specific context,

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[37] Ibid, 38-9.
[38] Ibid, 27.

his conclusions and work must be approached critically and supplemented with further research to provide a more nuanced understanding of Palestinian migrant experiences in the region.

Manzar Fooroohar cites the Palestinian migrants' growing economic power in the 1920s and 1930s as a reason for their targeting by local elites.[39] Her study's view on the discrimination experienced by Palestinians in Honduras and El Salvador focuses specifically on this economic power factor as the cause. In her view, the Great Depression of 1929 incited the targeting of Palestinians; the community's position as prominent industrialists in the textile scene welcomed this discrimination. In regards to integration, she states that "an unintended consequence of the anti-immigrant/anti-Palestinian discrimination and legislation of the 1930s [is that it] hastened the assimilation of the Palestinian community in the host countries." Further on this topic, she states:

> "In El Salvador, an additional consequence that was emphasized in interviews was the new tendency among Palestinians in the 1930s and 1940s to try to conceal their ethnic identity and refrain from speaking Arabic outside their homes as a result of incidents against Palestinian youth speaking Arabic in public. This was one reason for the loss of the Arabic language among children of the immigrants. It is likely that the trend to marry outside the community was also hastened by the discrimination."[40]

Her research relies upon both official publications and oral histories in detailing the Palestinian migrant experience in El Salvador. Unlike Suter, Fooroohar does not dismiss the series of laws that banned "*turcos*" from the country and prohibited them from opening businesses; she labels them as "discriminatory."[41] Whilst Suter implied that the discrimination that migrants faced encouraged their integration, Fooroohar was the first to fully claim that this discrimination had the unintended effect of assimilating these immigrants.[42] Unlike Suter's blanket claim that Palestinians were fully accepted as an "in-group" after 1932, Fooroohar's

[39] Manzar Foroohar, "Palestinians in Central America," 12.
[40] Ibid, 14.
[41] Ibid, 13.
[42] Ibid, 14.

claims, which are based upon interviews with the studied population itself, provide a deeper understanding of discrimination that led to the assimilation of the migrants.[43]

Robin DeLugan is the most recent English language researcher to write about Palestinian Salvadorans and mestizo nationalism.[44] She works off of both Suter and Fooroohar's research to place Palestinian Salvadoran history into the context of a national dialogue centered around mestizaje. DeLugan does not provide new information in terms of primary source research, but is the first to combine both narratives of mestizo nationalism in Latin America and El Salvador and its intersection with "*turco"* and "*chino"* identities in the country. The research includes a historical overview of the process of mestizaje in El Salvador. She is the first to make the connection to the alienating effects of mestizo nationalist politics: "The emerging national ideology of mestizaje masked class and ethnic cleavages in Salvadoran society, while situating Indigenous populations at the margins and marking Afro-descendants as well as Near and Far Eastern immigrant populations as outsiders."[45]

Melissa Rivas Montoya authored the first full book on the Palestinian diaspora in El Salvador, and being a Salvadoran herself, provided a much richer context to the political machinations in effect at the time, alongside having greater access to interviewees. The third chapter of her book utilizes newspaper articles in both the *Diario Oficial* and other private presses, along with personal interviews, to provide a full look at the types of discrimination that

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[43] For this current study, Fooroohar's research lacks certain specificity. For instance, she approaches this topic as a researcher of Palestinian history and does not firmly place herself in the Salvadoran historical context. Her omission of the mestizo Nationalist movement makes her claim that economic reasons were the primary causes for discrimination against the migrants. Her conclusion omits that white immigrants were allowed to engage in business unperturbed and the context of the Palestinians' racialization by the forces of the nationalist project. Her focus on both Honduras and El Salvador also stymies her research, as the individual contexts of each country are not interchangeable. a

[44] This claim is to the best of the author's knowledge.

[45] Robin M. DeLugan, "'Turcos' and 'Chinos' in El Salvador: Orientalizing Ethno-Racialization and the Transforming Dynamics of National Belonging," *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies 11*, no 2 (2016): 151.

Palestinians faced. Montoya states that the migration restrictions, "Principally, had a racist component that sought to protect *the Salvadoran mestiza race* as to *improve it* through the mix with European immigrants."[46] She later goes on to state that "una defensa del idioma (a defense of the language)" by the intellectual elite was an expressed goal.[47] This latter part is something that Montoya highlights throughout the chapter.

Whilst both Suter and Fooroohar depicted discrimination as being generalized amongst Salvadoran society, Montoya describes it as something promulgated by the intellectuals and the elites. She argues that "The discrimination was not generalized, but appears to be that it occurred principally within urban areas, that is, cities and department heads."[48,49] Whilst she maintains, like Suter, that discrimination had its roots in the European racial ideology of the intellectuals and elites, she differs from both Suter and Fooroohar on the general harassment that Palestinians experienced in their daily lives. Montoya's study provides the most context for the different possible reactions that elites could have to the Palestinian population in El Salvador. With her large quantity of sources, interviews, and background knowledge on the historical developments of El Salvador during this time of political and economic unrest, she provides the best current exploration of discrimination.

This current study aims to synthesize and refine the perspectives of Suter, Fooroohar, and Montoya by centering discrimination as the catalyst for the Palestinian community's integration into Salvadoran society. While Suter's work establishes the ideological framework of mestizo nationalism and its exclusionary policies, his dismissal of discriminatory laws against the

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[46] "Principalmente, tuvo un componente racista que buscaba tanto proteger a la raza mestiza salvadoreña como mejorarla a través la mezcla con los inmigrantes europeos." Translated from Spanish by the author. Melissa Rivas Montoya, *La Diáspora Palestina en El Salvador,* 107.
[47] Ibid, 108.
[48] "la discriminación no fue generalizada, sino parece ser que se dio principalmente en las zonas urbanas, esto es, ciudades y cabeceras departamentales." Translated from Spanish by the author. Ibid, 120.
[49] Ibid*,* 122.

community and his lack of individual perspectives from Palestinians in El Salvador overlook necessary viewpoints to fully understand the process of discrimination and integration. Fooroohar's oral histories reveal the lived consequences of this discrimination - language loss, intermarriage, and cultural concealment - yet her analysis neglects the broader nationalist project that racialized Palestinians and viewed them as incompatible with Salvadoran identity. Whilst Montoya did add alternative perspectives on racial ideology, she fails to fit them into the context of a greater nationalist movement and labels them simply as xenophobia. By integrating aspects of these previous studies, I hope to provide a more fuller understanding of the effects that mestizo nationalism had on discrimination and incorporate different reactions that the Palestinian community had to this discrimination, whether that is alienation, resistance, or hastened assimilation.

To trace this process, the study turns to primary sources that capture the government's, elites', and Palestinians' reactions to discriminatory laws and social conditions. The primary sources key to this study are official Spanish publications in *El Diario Oficial* that highlight the legal aspect of discrimination, articles published in public newspapers printed in El Salvador during the 1920s-40s which underline public sentiment towards the immigrant population, and interviews with Salvadorans of Palestinian ancestry conducted by historians, anthropologists, and journalists within the past decade. By looking at these sources, this study intends to detail the kinds of discrimination that Palestinians faced and the ways that this discrimination encouraged integration.

The precedent for legal discrimination based upon race and ethnicity came in 1897 with a reform to the *Ley de Extranjería* (law of foreigners) which banned Chinese foreigners from establishing themselves in El Salvador.[50] Before this reform, immigration could be banned to

[50] *Diario Oficial*, May 22, 1897.

persons involved in illegal activities, such as to pirates, slave traffickers, arsonists, counterfeiters, assassins, plagiarists, and thieves; all of which were labeled under the common term, "pernicious." With the 1897 reform, the Chinese were then added to this "pernicious" designation which would over time come to be the method of which foreign non-white immigrants would be targeted.

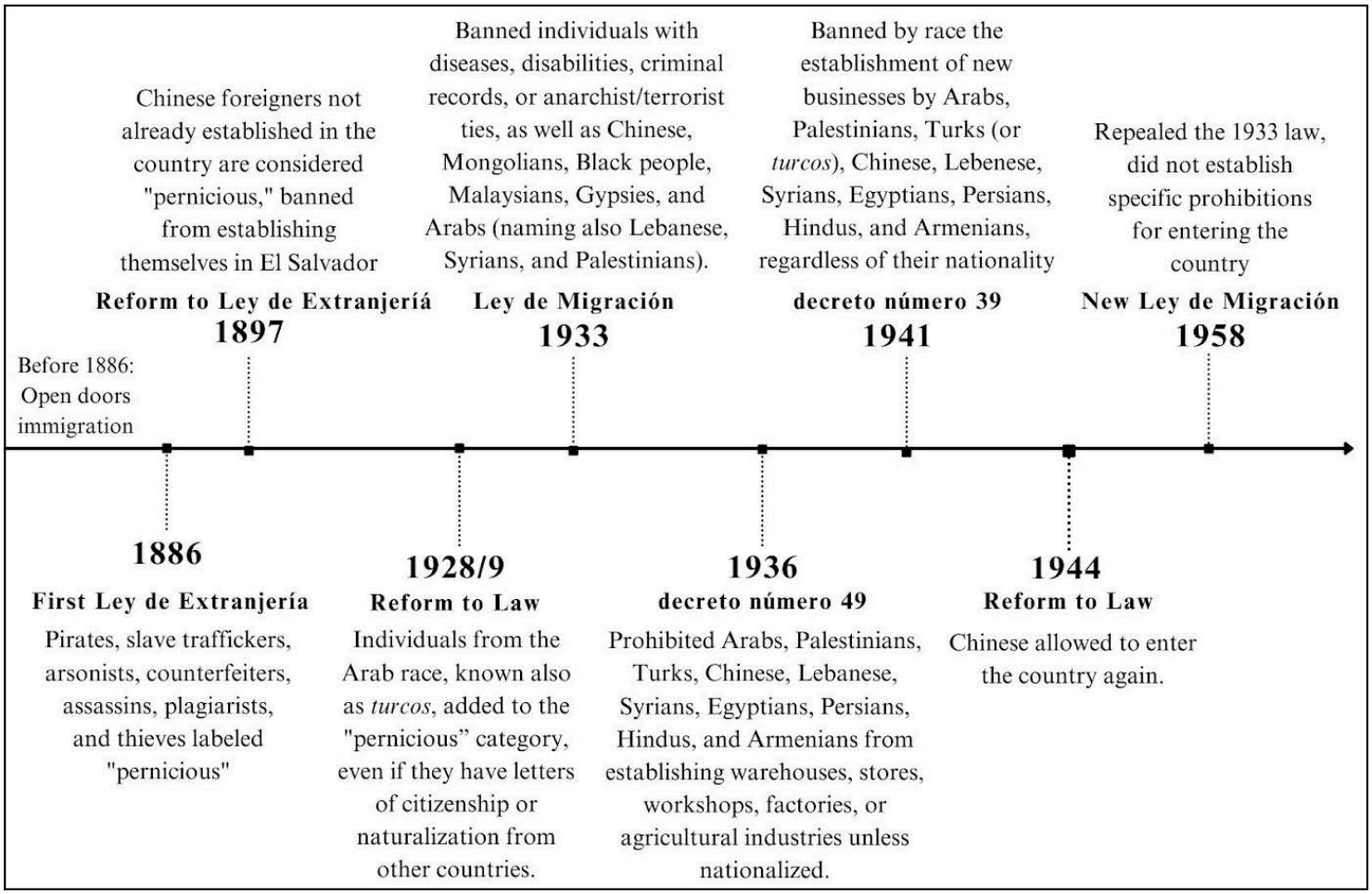

Figure 1: Timeline of laws that affected the Palestinian community

However, Palestinians were not yet subject to this same othering until the start of the nationalist era. In the years leading up to the 1920s, Palestinian "turcos" had generally been

"mostly unknown" as a distinct group in El Salvador.[51] Since the racial traits of Palestinians were harder to distinguish from that of a mestizo person than were Chinese traits, discrimination did not manifest as easily as it did for the Chinese. Salvadoran society, up until the 1920s, still viewed itself as "cosmopolitan" and did not identify as a national body—Palestinians that were known individually were tacitly accepted.[52] With the budding of the nationalist movement at the start of the 1920s, the position of Palestinians and other foreigners within the country drastically changed.

For one, the community started to receive much more media attention; in a negative way. As more Palestinians migrated to El Salvador in the 1920s and entered into commerce, the Salvadoran press started to represent Palestinians in racialist terms. Palestinians were depicted mostly as having a "pernicious" effect on Salvadoran women. One such account, published in El Diario del Pueblo in March of 1920, recounted a conflict between a female innkeeper and a Palestinian merchant: "A poor innkeeper sat down on the sidewalk in front of a Palestinian shop, and with the violence characteristic of his race, he [the Palestinian shop owner] assaulted her, and not only that, but also slapped her. This violence by some turcos toward women is well known, and it must be punished according to the law."[53] The language referring to the violence as "characteristic of his race" serves to dehumanize Palestinians within the country. This portrayal aligned with the mestizo nationalist project, which weaponized gendered and racialized tropes to justify exclusion of migrants. By associating them with violence, specifically violence against women, the nationalist regime can easily otherize them from the Salvadoran imagined community. The attacks against "us," the Salvadoran people, by "them," the non-Mestizo foreign

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[51] Olivier Prud'homme, "De Belén a El Salvador: migración de cristiano-palestinos y sus prácticas comerciales como estrategia de inserción (1886-1918)," in *Poder, actores sociales y conflictividad El Salvador, 1786-1972,* ed. Carlos Gregorio López Bernal (San Salvador, 2011): 267.
[52] Suter, "The Mestizo Nation," 33.
[53] "Las violencias de un comerciante turco con una pobre mujer," *Diario del Pueblo*, 22 March 1920, 4.

element, were used to justify anti-Palestinian sentiment, but also to display Salvadorans as under attack by these "pernicious" foreigners. The elite feign worry for the lower economic and vulnerable women of El Salvador to weaponize their "oppression" against the Palestinian community.

Economic participation of Palestinians had been depicted in the media as, generally, being negative for the nation. A 1924 article in *El Dia* argued: "If nationalizing everything is what today is about in El Salvador, we should start by nationalizing commerce, the small commerce, at least, since this branch of the productive forces of the nation has ended up in the hands of the chino and turco communities."[54] Participation of foreigners in commerce was seen inherently as negative by the press, composed by and for the national elite, who intended to otherize these communities.

At the precipice of the Great Depression in 1929, another reform would be added to the *Ley de Extrajería* that further prohibited entrance to Palestinians. The assembly of the National Legislature of the Republic of El Salvador passed a law where it stated: "also to be considered as pernicious foreigners [...] the individuals of the Arab race, or also known in the country by the name turcos, even if they appear with letters of citizenship or naturalization from other countries."[55] The 1929 law would be the first to discriminate directly against the Palestinian immigrant community and place them in the same category of criminals based solely upon their racial origin. An origin of the law likely came from these protests by the literate class published in the press condemning these migrants for their economic success and racial inferiority.

The passage of the 1929 reform to the *Ley de Extranjería* was well received by the white Salvadoran elite, who viewed it as a necessary measure to protect the nation from "undesirable"

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[54] "Nacionalicemos el comercio," *El Día*, June 24, 1924, 1.
[55] *Diario Oficial*, March 23, 1929.

immigrant groups. Isabela Cromeyer[56], a white Salvadoran of German descent, expressed support for the reform in an opinion piece she wrote in El Diario del Pueblo: “The country is pleased about the decree having been passed prohibiting the entrance to the Republic to the Chinese and Arabs, Palestinians or Turcos, as they are generally called, by considering them pernicious. These two races had invaded in such a way, that if they did not dictate these measures, who knows if Salvadorans would have had to leave our country.”[57] She later states: “The degeneration of our race is, in part, due to immigration.” Cromeyer’s endorsement of the 1929 reform reflects the broader sentiment among the white elite, who viewed non-European immigrants, particularly the newly labeled “pernicious” Palestinians, as a threat to the idealized mestizo nation.

Palestinians also came to be associated with anti-government agitation. After the uprising of 1932, the authorities sought to explain its origins and success. According to historian López Bernal, they concluded that it was only able to occur if it was the mental manipulation of the “Indio,” and immediately they suspected the presence of foreigners that were “dedicated to agitating the campesinos of the east of the country.”[58] The elites posited that there was no place for class conflict in the country because there did not exist exploitation, injustice, nor lack of liberty. Therefore, in their conclusions, it had to be that the “pure and stupid” Indio fell for the machinations of foreign communists. The Palestinian community, already othered and disliked, was a perfect scapegoat.

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[56] The identity of the author of this source is not explicitly identified as white, but some inferences can be made from the last name “Cromeyer.” The name Cromeyer appears to be a Salvadoran hispanicization of the German name “Krämer.” German Salvadorans were a competing ethnicity with the Palestinians in commerce, and thus Cromeyer’s disdain for the Arab population originated from these intergroup rivalries.

[57] Translated from Spanish by the author. Isabel M. Cromeyer. "Ya no vendrán turcos ni chinos al país," *Diario del Pueblo*, April 25, 1929. 3.

[58] Carlos Gregorio López Bernal, "Lecturas desde la derecha y la izquierda sobre el levantamiento de 1932: Implicaciones político-culturales," in *Las masas, la matanza y el martinato en El Salvador*, ed. Erik Ching, Carlos Gregorio López Bernal and Virginia Tilley (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2007): 191.

Their scapegoating was rather strange, as the community, full of middle-class, affluent business owners, were not favorable to the communist uprising. The Palestinian community of San Salvador was publicly thanked in late January of 1932 by the newspaper *El Día* for donating 1,500 colones to the anti-comunist campaign.[59] Whether this was a genuine donation, or members of the community were scared of having their people associated with the rebellion in their fragile social standing, cannot be said. Despite it, reporters saw them as instantly identifiable and assumed that they provoked the indigenous population to rise up as they had in other countries like Guatemala.[60] This fear of turco meddling in the internal affairs of the country led to the deportation of Palestinians to set an example. On June 27th of 1933, following the deportation of Jorge Abullarde, the notice given to the public stated that his deportation was "a measure that would be a great example for the entire Palestinian community, which includes members who interfere in the internal politics of the Republic."[61] This exemplary deportation was intended to alienate the community, but also to lend credence to the idea that Palestinians were responsible for further agitating the chaotic state of the country under the Martinez dictatorship.

Possibly inspired by the accounts of alleged turco meddling in left-wing politics, the government of El Salvador took further measures to remove these foreign elements from the country. The 1933 *Ley de Migracion* (Law of Migration) went further to ban foreign persons who "propagate doctrines contrary to the family, to private property or the social and economic regime established in El Salvador." Alongside these banned traits were "new immigrants from Arabia, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, or Turkey, generally known by the name 'turcos.'"

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[59] *El Día*, January 29, 1932, 2.
[60] "Restricciones a la inmigración", *El Dia*, February 11, 1932.
[61] El caso contra Abullarade se encuentra en un informe preparado por el director de Policia de Santa Ana, June 27, 1933, in Montoya, *La Diáspora Palestina*, 132.

Palestinians were associated not only with an economic threat to the nation, but a moral one as well, due to their race.

Palestinian immigrants were also seen as a threat to the economy. In 1936, *decréto numero 49* banned the establishment of new businesses by Palestinians unless they were naturalized.[62] In 1941, Article 40 of Decree No. 39 expanded this prohibition to those who were even naturalized. It also established a fine of 200 colons for officials of any municipality who permitted "*turcos"* and other Asians who opened businesses in their departments as a way of enforcing this economic nationalism.[63] The focus of these laws on Asians, notably "*turcos*," highlights a racist nationalist ideology behind these policies that favors whiteness and mestizaje. These economic restrictions only focus on limiting the economic participation of Asians, which nationalist ideology had constructed as racially inferior. No immigrants from a European or American nation were targeted, even though United States and European economic involvement in the country was significant.

Across the span of the nationalist era, reactions to Palestinian economic success were mostly negative amongst the Salvadoran literati. Protection of the Salvadoran worker was highlighted as an issue that was specifically targeted towards the Palestinian community. A 1936 article in El Dia described the "very favorable comments being made in all quarters of the country" due to the law "which limits in a necessary form the current of Arab, Palestinian, turcos [...] that had been directing against commerce, industry, agriculture, and other activities."[64] An article written in *Epinion Estudiantil* in 1944 stated that "the 'turco' is not an intellectual nor a man who contributes to the progress of our country" and that "they have already amassed great

[62] *Diario Oficial*, May 20, 1936.
[63] *Diario Oficial*, July 24, 1941.
[64] "Los palestinos, libaneses, turcos y chinos ya no podrían establecer almacenes comerciales, ni fábricas ni industrias agrícolas en el país," *La República*, March 9, 1936, 4.

fortunes by establishing large factories in which they treat our national workers unfairly." These articles both construct Palestinians further as being a "pernicious" force based upon their race, and construct them as existing outside of the national character, even though by 1944 the Palestinians that had been living in the country had been there for over 10 years, due to the banning of immigration in 1933. Further, the depictions once again foster an "us" versus "them" mentality for the purpose of a nationalist, xenophobic call to action.

The nationalist movement was overall successful in planting inferior and "pernicious" views of the Palestinian community in the minds of the literate middle and upper classes. From this demonization of Palestinians in the nationalist press, social discrimination became more pronounced against Palestinians. Alienation was reported in several sources to be the reactions that the Palestinian community had due to the hostility of certain sectors of the country towards them after the Martínez regime. Héctor Dada Hirezi (1938), as a child, was forbidden from coming to the birthday of a peer because the friend's parents "would not have a turco in the house."[65] He also recounts his father's experiences in medical school. Though a top student, his father's grades were deliberately lowered because "they could not give a turco the honor of being the most distinguished student."[66] This bigotry drove his father to complete his studies in France. Hirezi himself faced similar, though less severe, prejudice. The racist bred among the literate population had the direct effect of manifesting in ways meant to alienate the "inferior turcos."

Discrimination and alienation were not met without some type of resistance, however. In response to the legal and social push for economic nationalization, a method the community took for self-preservation took form in the creation of social clubs and civic organizations. In 1936, the Arab community of El Salvador founded the *Cámara de Comercio e Industria Palestino*

[65] Valencia, "el olor de berenjena."
[66] Hector Dada Hirezi in Ibid.

Libanesa en El Salvador, C. A. whose goal was “unifying the commerce and of the communities that speak Arabic, narrowly maintaining the harmony amongst it."[67] The Cámara de Comercio e Industria Palestino Libanesa was “to resolve in arbitration the commercial matters submitted to it by the people of the colony," and "inform the Board of Directors of any commercial act that is deemed harmful to the good name and interests of the Arabic-speaking colonies." With the specific focus on “Arabic-speaking communities” it could be said that this organization not only had the goal of protecting combined Arab interests in El Salvador but also to act as a civil society wing of the Arabic-speaking community. Comprising 100 businessmen, the community that was formed allowed for a space where Arabic could be spoken freely.

In 1942 the Centro Juventud Palestina (Palestinian Youth Center) was founded. The CJP would admit “all people that belong to the Arab race and speak Arabic” with the goal of “stretching the ties of solidarities among the communities of Arabic-speaking residents in the country or outside of it” as well as “the physical, moral, and intellectual betterment of its associates and protecting the partners in whatever grave emergency.”[68] Once again, a theme of collective group resistance is seen in the founding words of the organization. Amongst all the clubs formed by Palestinian Salvadorans, the shared Arab identity and speaking Arabic are key factors. The social clubs were formed in part due to their exclusion from other civil society organizations. Even though the Palestinian community was an affluent part of Salvadoran society, their racialized status as turcos prohibited them from entering social clubs.[69] This caused them to form their own places where they could be accepted.

Despite this small resistance to discrimination, and attempts to maintain their culture, the community ultimately became integrated into Salvadoran society; paradoxically despite the

[67] *Diario Oficial*, 23 June 1936, 1,859.
[68] *Diario Oficial*, 18 June 1942, 1,846-1,847.
[69] Fooroohar, “Palestinian in Central America,” 14.

attempts to alienate them. A key aspect of the nationalization project was linguistic conformity to Spanish. Jan Suter states that “[the] process of nationalizing society [...] was facilitated by the almost exclusive and universal use of Spanish as a means of communication.”[70] With this homogenization project in mind, intellectual members of *El Ateneo*, a cultural, literary, and artistic non-profit institution, argued for a bill that would provide for the "conservation of the purity of the Spanish language" by prohibiting the use of foreign languages on signs of houses, commercial companies, and businesses. In addition, this bill prohibited the Spanish localization of the names and surnames of foreigners, such as the Chinese and Arab communities.[71] Linguistic homogenization was key to the mestizo national movement, as any visible foreign element threatened the idealized unity of the nation. By denying Arab and Chinese communities the right to Hispanicize their names, the state further marginalized them. Despite these restrictions, the hostile attitude to foreign languages (outside of the accepted European ones) facilitated Palestinian integration into a Spanish monolingual community.

These attempts to suppress foreign languages and isolate the Palestinian migrant community also forced Palestinian migrants to integrate further into a Hispanic identity. A tendency among Palestinians in the 1930s-1940s was to hide their ethnic identity and avoid speaking Arabic outside of the house due to incidents against Palestinian youth speaking Arabic in public.[72] This was seen as one reason for the loss of the Arabic language among children of the immigrants.[73] For others, this discrimination had an integrating effect that encouraged assimilation. José Jorge Simán Jacir, who would become a prominent business leader in El Salvador, recited his experiences with racism: “I studied in the Liceo Salvadoreño and

[70] Suter, “Pernicious Aliens,” 30.
[71] Montoya, *La Diaspora Palestina*, 108.
[72] Foroohar, “Palestinians in Central America,” 14.
[73] Ibid.

everything was ‘Look here turco, look there turco, turco eats eggplant.’ That is what my classmates would tell me, and then I stopped eating it because I thought, when I would eat it, the smell of eggplant would stay on me.”[74] Despite this discrimination that Siman Jacir faced, “turco” cuisine still exists today in El Salvador and is one of the key remaining factors of Palestinian culture. Nonetheless, such experiences pushed many Palestinians to shed markers of identity, hastening their integration even as they remained socially marginalized.

Palestinian children in El Salvador were not considered Salvadoran by birth but retained the citizenship status of their parents and could only become Salvadorans through a process of naturalization. Many of these Salvadoran-born Palestinians petitioned the government to plead their case for citizenship. A petition from Cristina Maria Daboub to the Department of Migration laments the incongruence of the law: "According to the immigration law, I am a foreigner… but I am Salvadoran by birth and by heart, for having been raised in the same place, for maintaining its healthy customs and above all—for conviction."[75] In many of these petitions, second-generation Palestinians in El Salvador stressed their Salvadoran identity over their Palestinian identity inherited from their parents. Daboub’s emphasis on her Salvadoran integration not only comes from the fact that the children of migrants attended Salvadoran schools and existed in a Salvadoran cultural zeitgeist but also from the vulnerability of being classified a foreigner. As a means of protection, children of the migrants would self-identify with the nationalist regime so that they could receive the benefits of citizenship.

By the time that the 1940s came to a close, the second generation of Palestinians in El Salvadoran were already fully integrated into a Salvadoran identity. They were non-Arabic speaking, dressed in Salvadoran clothes, married outside of their community, and considered

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[74] José Jorge Simán Jacir in Roberto Valencia, "Los turcos y el olor de la berenjena," *El Faro*, April 25, 2018, https://elfaro.net/es/201804/el_salvador/21762/los-turcos-y-el-olor-de-la-berenjena.htm

[75] Cristina Maria Daboub as cited in Fallas, “The Power of El Salvador's Palestinian Diaspora.”

themselves a full part of Salvadoran society with little culture remaining of their Arab roots.[76] While most claim to be grateful to be Salvadorans and express patriotism, these sentiments did not come naturally, but through a long process of discrimination that obliged assimilation as the safest way of leading a successful life in El Salvador.

This paper has highlighted the discrimination that systematically marginalized Palestinian migrants during El Salvador's nationalist era. Palestinian reactions to this discrimination varied, with alienation, resistance, and ultimately coerced assimilation being the result of it. The roots of the racism founded during the nationalist era still linger to this day, yet the community has risen to the highest positions of power, exemplified by current President Nayib Bukele who openly claims Palestinian descent on his father's side. Journalist for *El Faro* Roberto Valencia states that "the country cannot be explained without the Handals, the Zablahs, the Hasbúns; without the Simáns and Salumes; without the Bukeles."[77]

Despite their complete assimilation into a Hispanic Salvadoran identity, the community still maintains solidarity with the plight of the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation and the UN-alleged ongoing genocide in Gaza. Khoury also stated: "As an expression of our cultural identity, we participate in pro-Palestine political and cultural events on every possible occasion and follow the latest news."[78] A quick view through the official Facebook page of the *Asociacion Salvadoreña Palestina* reveals criticisms about the Palestinian Authority, infographics demanding an end to Israeli-sponsored genocide, and community-based demonstrations. Organizations like the Embajada Palestina en El Salvador and Club Árabe work to spread awareness about Palestinian issues alongside Arab culture. In March of 2025, these two

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[76] Fooroohar, "Palestinians in Central America," 14.
[77] Valencia, "El Olor de Berenjena."
[78] Yousef M. Aljamal, "'We Have a Pro-Palestinian Lobby in Latin America' - Interview with Simán Khoury," *Politics Today*, 2021.

organizations screened the documentary “No Other Land” across the country. The most impactful effect the Palestinian community has had in El Salvador is its activism to close the Israeli embassy in 2017 under the left-wing government.

In November of 2024, the Club Arabe opened the first Palestinian history museum in Latin America. With the opening of this museum, the Palestinian community of El Salvador maintains its ties to their homeland and history despite the early 20th-century government that tried to erase them. Trends appear of Salvadorans with Palestinian descent attempting to learn Arabic, advocate for Palestine, and engage in cultural activities that would have once been hidden due to the nationalist reaction to them. The modern movement of Salvadoran society to recognize cultural differences and move towards a multi-ethnic understanding of Salvadoran identity exists in contrast with a nationalist past that sought to erase non-mestizo identities. Today, Salvadorans of Palestinian descent try to reclaim a hybrid identity challenging the very homogenization that once targeted them. A complex dialogue about Arab, Palestinian, and Salvadoran identity continues as the community finds importance in their own history and the realities of Palestinians the world over.

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