# How the Lebanese conquered Brazil

## Success came through hard work and perseverance

LEBANESE IN BRAZIL SOCIETY July 3, 2014 *by* Joe Dyke

*Photo of Beirut Port with ships used for migration (Credit: LERC Archives)*

*This article is part of an in depth special report on the Lebanese in Brazil. Read more stories as they're published here, or pick up July's issue at newsstands in Lebanon.*

Two years ago, Amin Maalouf — perhaps the most famous Lebanese social scientist — made a trip to São Paulo, Brazil's most populous city. Speaking at a prominent club for Lebanese expatriates, he declared that for many, Brazil was the materialization of the Lebanese dream.

It is hard to disagree with him. Perhaps more so than any other country outside of their homeland, the Lebanese run Brazil. In virtually every sector of the economy, some of the most powerful individuals can trace their lineage back to the Cedar country.

Though the exact number is disputed (see box), it is clear that there are at least 6 million Brazilians of Lebanese origin. In business, economics, culture and many other fields, Lebanese people sit at the top of Brazilian society. Despite making up less than 5 percent of the population, 10 percent of parliamentarians have Lebanese origins.

Yet these migrants were not always so successful. Arriving in the late 1800s, much of the first generation brought with them nothing but the clothes on their backs. The story of how they came to make up the Brazilian elite is one of free markets, risky decisions, stigma, and above all, hard work.

**Humble beginnings**

Cheap Chinese goods flooding the market, undermining profits and forcing businesses into bankruptcy — it may sound a distinctly modern story, borne of an era of rapid globalization. Yet for those with knowledge of Lebanese history, today's crisis in the West is merely an echo of the events that helped provoke the first wave of mass emigration in the late nineteenth century.

Eliane Fersan, a researcher on the history of Lebanese migration, has documented a number of factors that led to a huge wave of migration in that period. Among these was, perhaps unsurprisingly for a fragmented region, violence. In 1860, a war between Maronite Christians and Druze communities led to the deaths of thousands of people. The lack of Ottoman

**What's in a number**

It is widely known that there are more people of Lebanese descent in Brazil than there are citizens of Lebanon itself. Yet how many more is a matter for ongoing debate in both countries. Some estimates have put the number as high as 12 million, while others are as low as four or five. That puts the Lebanese–Brazilian population somewhere between 3 and 6 percent of the country's total population of 200 million. Trying to get a reliable estimate is a lot harder than it may initially appear.

The first issue is documentation. There are no reliable estimates for the number of Lebanese people that arrived in Brazil in the late 1800s and early 1900s. And when they were recorded, because their documents came from the Ottoman Empire, they were called *turkos* — making no distinction between Lebanese, Syrians and other groups.

As Oswaldo Truzzi writes in the book by Roberto Khatlab "Lebanese migrants to Brazil: An Annotated Bibliography," "For a long time, the data on immigration flows from the region was classified under one category 'other nationalities' in Brazil. Only in the state of São Paulo, where

protection for the Christian community, coupled with the fear of conscription into the Turkish armies, convinced the first few pioneers to seek safer shores.

But the exodus was really accelerated, not due to politics, but to economics — in particular the collapse of the Levant's economy.

From the late 1870s onwards, the silk trade — the most common export of the predominantly Christian regions of Mount Lebanon — collapsed as European consumers took advantage of cheaper transport to buy Chinese and other East Asian goods instead.

As the academic John Tofik Karam noted in a paper on the period, the Chinese takeover left Lebanese exporters with no market. "Reaching its zenith in the early 1870s, the price of silk spiraled downward to nearly half its value in the 1890s," he wrote.

The cumulative effect of a collapse of business, worsening security and few job prospects was the start of a rush for the nearest exit. From 1860 to 1914, between a third and a half of Mount Lebanon's immigration services became more effective after 1908, were these immigrants registered as Turk, Turk-Asian, Lebanese, or Syrian. Between 1908 and 1941, these groups amounted to 4 percent (48,326 individuals) of the total of immigrants that entered the state."

In 1920 and 1940 the national censuses offered the first official estimates of the numbers of Lebanese and Syrians in the country. Strangely, despite ongoing immigration, there were officially fewer in 1940 (46,614) than in 1920 (50,246). In recent years that number has fallen still, "becoming statistically of little significance" according to Truzzi. Yet this is likely due to reporting methods — Brazil's census does not differentiate between Brazilians whose parents or grandparents are of foreign origin. Lebanese have also intermarried with other Brazilian groups, with many losing their Arabic name in the process.

Guita Hourani, director of the Lebanese Emigration Research Center at the Notre Dame University near Beirut, says she believes the number is between 6 and 8 million, but certainly not higher. "Lebanon's population in 1900 is estimated to have been 380,000. Hence, it is scientifically impossible that the emigrant population would increase to 12 or more million, while the remaining population in Lebanon would increase to 3.8 million." She points out that some of the overestimates have come from the prominent role of Lebanese in Brazilian society. Some, for example, have extrapolated that because around 10 percent of Brazilian parliamentarians have Lebanese roots, they make up 10 percent of the population, a point she says is unfounded since "parliamentarians are

population is believed to have emigrated — while well over 90 percent of all emigrants from Lebanese territory are thought to have been Christian. They fled across the world looking for a better life, becoming the first generation of the Lebanese diaspora.

elected by everyone regardless of their origins." There is also the problem of self-identification — many who are perhaps just one-eighth Lebanese will often feel proud of their roots, yet they have little realistic claim to Lebanese nationality.

Hourani believes that the Lebanese successes in Brazil are even more impressive when put into the context of their relative size. "Exaggerating the numbers eclipses the success of this small population … that has a high level of exposure in their immigration countries."

**A new start**

Of these emigrants, around a third are estimated to have reached the Brazilian coast. Quite how so many ended up making the country their new home is a matter of debate. The popular story, particularly among the Lebanese–Brazilian community, is one of divine providence. In this particular version of history, Brazil's last emperor Dom Pedro II plays a sort of Cyrus the Great, the hero to an embattled community — offering them the chance to start again in a new land.

The reason for Pedro's hallowed status is two trips he made to the Middle East in the 1870s, the latter of which involved an extensive tour of Lebanon. An enlightened and kind man, legend has it that on the road to the ruins of Baalbeck he stopped at the side of the road to talk to some peasants. After hearing of their woes, he implored them to abandon the Bekaa's arid ground in favor of more luscious climes in Latin America.

Lody Brais, president of the Lebanese–Brazilian Cultural Association, believes Pedro's actions provoked the rush to Brazil. Three years ago, she organized an exhibition to mark 135 years since the emperor's visit. "We are here thanks to Dom Pedro II, because when he went he encouraged people to come to Brazil," she says. "There was already a small working community and he was pleased with them so when he went he invited [the Lebanese] with open arms."

Yet the truth may have been less clear-cut. Information travelled slowly in that period and it is unlikely that Dom Pedro's call would have had a profound effect across the country. In fact, far from being pre-determined to reach Brazil, it seems that most Lebanese were more concerned about leaving than selecting their destination.

Fersan, the researcher on Lebanese migration, points out that many of the

first generation had little idea where they were going. “Most emigrants wanted to reach *Amerka* wherever this might turn out to be, before actually choosing their specific destination,” she says. “When they were refused entry to the United States (for health or legal reasons) they used to travel down south instead of returning home, and landed mostly in Brazil or Argentina.”

LERC Archives, Roberto Khatlab Co

*Lebanese peddlers in São Paulo, 1960*

**Peddle me this**

Those that arrived in Brazil found a country reaching out to the world. The rubber industry was booming and Brazil's leaders realized that the population of only a few million people meant a need for new manpower. In the latter period of the 19th century they invited people from across the world to help build this new nation. Swathes of migrants from Germany, Italy, Japan and other nations flocked to Brazil to help make it the array of nationalities it is today. Among these were tens of thousands of Arabs, mostly Lebanese but also Syrians and Palestinians.

Yet the Arabs distinguished themselves in one key way from the other new arrivals — they shunned agriculture in favor of trade.

This was partly because they faced higher barriers to entering the sector. Due to agreements between the Brazilian rulers and their European counterparts, those who emigrated from Europe often had prearranged work in Brazil, with the vast majority going to work on farms. Yet the Ottoman Empire had no such agreement, making access to the agricultural sector more challenging for Lebanese immigrants.

Elsa El Hachem-Kirby, an academic who wrote her PhD on the Lebanese community in Brazil, stresses that this lack of support was both a curse and a blessing. "Lebanese emigration was spontaneous, and there was no state behind them. This was initially negative as it meant they had little protection but it also allowed them freedom to work however they liked — rather than being forced to be farmhands like some of the European immigrants."

**Non-Christian migration**

While the vast majority of Lebanese emigration to Brazil has been from the country's Christian population, a smaller percentage of the population came from the Muslim and Jewish communities. Reliable numbers are unfortunately unavailable, but estimates suggest that between 10 and 15 percent of Lebanese–Brazilians are of non-Christian descent.

**The Muslim community**

Hussein Kalout, a Lebanese–Brazilian academic who is currently a visiting

The vast majority of these new immigrants began to work as *mascates* — peddlers. As Kirby explains in an article on the topic, this typically involved travelling the country carrying a crate of goods for sale. "The *mascate* would replenish his stocks in the city, in this case São Paulo, but he would sell his products in the [rural] interior of the country."

professor at Harvard's political science department, comes from a Shia family. His father emigrated to Brazil in the 1960s but he speaks Arabic and has lived part of his life in Lebanon.

He describes four main waves of Lebanese emigration, the first of which — from the 1870s until the mid 20th century — was overwhelmingly Christian. Muslim immigration, he says, really began during World War II and picked up during a third wave in the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–90. The final wave, he says, started after the war as Israel's 1982–2000 occupation of southern Lebanon grated on the local population — with many from the Shia population moving for economic reasons.

For Kalout, Lebanese–Brazilian Muslims remain more connected to Lebanon and particularly to the Arabic language than their Christian counterparts. "The Lebanese Muslims are more connected to the land, to the religion and to the language," he says. "If you ask how many Lebanese–Brazilian Christians speak Arabic, compared to the Lebanese–Brazilian Muslims, the difference is huge."

This is partly due to chronology, as they emigrated later. Yet Kalout also thinks the connection to the region is greater. "I don't think the third generation Shia will become equal to the third generation Christians [in their connection with Lebanon] because they are more linked with the country, more linked to the situation," he says. While he thinks that many, like himself, have become largely irreligious in Brazil's more secular society, Lebanese–Brazilian Muslims remain politically aware of events in the Middle East.

The conditions for these workers were extremely tough — they often worked 20–hour days, travelling with cases on their backs in the most inhospitable of climates. Yet the rewards were potentially large and, unlike those in agriculture, went into their pockets rather than those of agrarian landlords.

Carlos Eddé is now head of the Lebanese National Bloc party but he lived in Brazil until 14 years ago. He says the Lebanese emigrants like his grandfather actually felt something of a release on arrival in Brazil — leaving Lebanon's rather stifling feudal economy for the frontier markets of Latin America. "A fresh immigrant once said to me: 'When we leave Lebanon and we come to this country we feel no tiredness, no cold, no heat, no thirst, no hunger — we just do it. And principally we feel no shame — in Lebanon we live in shame of not having the right house, the right clothes, not speaking the right way, not having the right education. This makes Lebanese in Lebanon ashamed of trying new things.'"

This work ethic and newfound sense of freedom

Lebanese–Brazilian Muslims are prominent in many areas of Brazilian society — in particular academia and medicine. Kalout adds that the distinction between the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam has not historically replicated itself in Brazil, with shared mosques and a unified Muslim federation.

Underscoring the importance of language, there are a growing number of Arabic-language educational bodies in the country. "In some cities in southern Brazil they have started to create Arab schools — not just a school to teach Arabic but a school to put your children to learn in Arabic."

**The Jewish community**

The Lebanese Jewish emigration to Brazil was predominantly in the latter half of the 20th century. Since the Nakba and concomitant birth of Israel in 1948, Arab Jews across the Middle East have often faced animosity and violence.

Sheila Mann was just 13 in 1967. Her family had been in Lebanon for "generations and generations," but when the Six Day War started between Israel and Jordan, Syria and Egypt, hostility grew toward the Lebanese Jewish community. "When we found out Israel had won the war, the Lebanese army was worried the people would attack the Jewish district [of central Beirut] so they closed it off. We had blackouts at night so nobody knew we were in."

"One day they had a demonstration near my home. From my veranda I could see one protester putting a photo of [Egyptian leader] Gamal Abdel Nasser on the barricades to provoke us," she says. Scared

enabled the first generation to succeed quickly. Within two generations, peddling would be synonymous with Arabs — in 1895, Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians made up 90 percent of the official register of peddlers in the city of São Paulo. The Arabs quickly gained a reputation for travelling to places that most other Brazilians wouldn't go to — often trekking through the Amazon carrying goods for sale.

Alfredo Cotait, a former senator and the president of the Lebanese–Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, points out that this type of work means the Lebanese community is found all over the country — though perhaps over 50 percent are found in São Paulo. "You will find Lebanese in all domains. There are 5,300 cities in Brazil and in each one you will find Lebanese businessmen."

That initial generation of peddlers often succeeded within one generation. Among them was Jorge Maalouf, who would later become head of the Lebanese community in São Paulo. His grandson Jorge Takla, one of Brazil's most important theater directors,

for their children, her parents decided to leave the country — initially for Israel. Within a decade, she says, all the Lebanese Jews she knew had left the country.

Yet her parents never liked Israel and would constantly bemoan their refugee status, longing for a return to Beirut. Mann, too, was never happy in Israel and at age 18 moved to Brazil with her new husband. "For me Lebanon is part of my life, my being. I cannot imagine not thinking about Lebanon. It was a happy time, my childhood," she says.

Lebanese–Brazilian Jews are relatively few but very successful. Perhaps foremost among them is the Safra family — owners of the Safra Group. The head of the family, Joseph Safra, is estimated by Forbes to be the second richest person in Brazil, with a personal fortune of $15.9 billion. (Executive contacted the family for an interview but they were in mourning over the death of Safra's brother, Moise.)

Mann says she thinks that the forced nature of their emigration has made many members of the Lebanese–Brazilian Jewish community skeptical of other Lebanese–Brazilians. "I have a lot of difficulties to convince them to be more open and they consider me a fool." She now runs an organization called Peace on the Table, which brings together Muslim and Jewish women of Middle Eastern descent to break down barriers over food.

believes that the Lebanese succeeded due to a combination of an impressive work rate and natural salesmanship. "[The Maaloufs] came from a very important family in Lebanon but when they came to Brazil they had no money and there was hunger here. They all started as *mascates*, yet they made money very quickly," he says.

Back in Lebanon this exodus was becoming a source of alarm for some in the Christian community. One Presbyterian church leader is quoted in the book "Lebanese migrants to Brazil" as saying: "The emigration fever doesn't appear to show any signs of decreasing … It's become an obsession. It took from our churches some of its most useful members; many of the teachers are upset." Yet in the same breath he reveals why attempts to hold them back failed. "An illiterate emigrant goes to America and after six months sends back a check for 300 or 400 dollars, more than a teacher's salary or two years' work of a shepherd."

Crucially, Lebanese families also had a high propensity to save the profits and reinvest them in businesses. By 1907, not peddling, but wholesale clothes and dry goods accounted for 80 percent of the 315 Arab-owned businesses in the city of São Paulo.

Nowadays, wandering down Rua 25 de Marco you are perhaps as likely to meet Koreans as Arabs — hundreds of stalls selling knock-off Brazil memorabilia, painting the street yellow and green. Yet look closely and the major São Paulo thoroughfare still shows signs of its Lebanese history — the odd street name or remaining Arabic shop name. For the first part of the 20th century, the street was the trading quarter for the Lebanese diaspora — where they both produced and sold a range of goods, with textiles the primary lure.

Jorge Maalouf's family was among the pioneers, quickly switching from peddling to textiles and establishing a major factory near Rua 25 de Marco. Within a few decades, Maalouf had become such a success he was making trips back to the motherland for philanthropy, being received lavishly by Lebanese politicians.

This interaction with Lebanon also went the other way — as stories of success fed back to those in the Middle East, thousands more packed up and left. Lebanese–Brazilian companies at that time also tended to prefer to employ from within the community — when they needed a new peddler, they more often went back to Lebanon rather than employing a Brazilian. Sons, nephews, or cousins would be summoned — thus encouraging yet more emigration from the home country.

**Stop sign**

Yet the worldwide financial crisis started by the 1929 Wall Street Crash put a halt to Brazil's growth. Demand for exports collapsed and thousands went out of business. Among those forced out of business was the grandfather of Francisco Rezek, later the head of Brazil's Supreme Court. "When the American crisis produced its effects in this country in 1929–1930, many of the businesses collapsed. Some of the most fortunate families required an arrangement with creditors in order to pay part of the debt," he says. "My grandfather didn't want to do it — he paid all the debts on his firms, closed up and moved to the countryside to live his last years modestly but very proud of his attitude."

The 1929 crash and the destitution it created fed extremism across the world — not least in Germany where it led to the rise of fascism that would indirectly reshape the Middle East forever — and Brazil was no exception. As people struggled to feed their families, it became increasingly common to lash out at immigrants — with Arabs bearing the brunt of many attacks.

Herbert Levy, one of the country's most powerful newspaper figures at the time, was among the most vocal critics. In one editorial he wrote that "the type of immigration required by the country's needs is that of agricultural

workers and the [Arabs] are not classified in this category," being rather "dedicated to commerce and speculative activities."

At other times, this hostility slid into all-out racism, with Edgar Roquette-Pinto, often considered the father of Brazilian radio, accusing Arabs of being a secretive and segregated group. "Although … they are obligated to enter into relations with the Brazilians, they live perfectly segregated in their race, in their norms, in their way of doing things."

### Victors of fortune

Yet the changing shape of both Brazil and the world was about to transform the Lebanese community from successful but stigmatized merchants into key pillars of Brazil's society. In 1930, Getulio Vargas rose to power. Recognizing Brazil's predominantly agricultural economy was ill-suited to the modern world, the dictator set a course for rapid industrialization. In 1919, industrial production accounted for just 21 percent of gross national product, but by 1939 that figure was 43 percent, while the number of factory workers in São Paulo trebled.

No group was as well placed to take advantage of this as the Lebanese. They had by this time established themselves as the merchant class in São Paulo, the country's economic hub. Small textile businesses were transformed into major factories, while

### A land of dialogue?

At the end of May a rather extraordinary event occurred: Hundreds of Lebanese people flocked to a conference in Beirut. While that may sound far from unusual, for some of the attendees it was their first steps on Lebanese soil. For these were the diaspora, drawn from around the world in recognition of their shared roots — though some had little previous interaction with the physical state of Lebanon.Lebanon's Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil opened the event, which had been organized by his ministry, with an ode to the powers of the Lebanese emigrant. "My dear friends," he said, "you are the second wing of Lebanon, you are the wealth of Lebanon, you are the energy of Lebanon … you are the pride of Lebanon."

Bassil stressed that he was seeking to engage more deeply with the Lebanese diaspora and that he was looking not merely for empty words of solidarity but for concrete measures to improve links.

"We did not organize this meeting just to hold an event or highlight an achievement. We want to start a collective journey together because each one of you has a success story," he said. "This partnership means that we will have a dialogue, we will have an exchange and sharing. This is why we want to listen to you and draw on your

national giants rose up in construction and other sectors.

By the early 1950s, the Lebanese diaspora had succeeded in becoming some of the country's top industrialists. In 1954 Lebanese President Camille Chamoun visited Brazil and was received in lavish fashion by a diaspora community that was both proud of its roots but also starting to grow beyond them. More importantly, there was recognition from the rest of the Brazilian society of their importance. No longer trading in the backwaters, the Lebanese integrated more, with intermarriage on the rise.

Yet while they were among the most powerful business powers of the time, those Lebanese were still far from the country's elite; few Lebanese–Brazilians were in parliament or had reached the top of the professions. This was to change with the later generations.

For far from encouraging their children to take over their hand-built empires, many of these pioneers prioritized, above all else, the education of their children. Antonio Chacra, a experiences of success and rich experiences abroad."

One concrete step forward is the Land of Dialogue of Civilizations (LDC) initiative. Launched by President Michel Sleiman in 2013, the LDC aims to encourage the United Nations to formally recognize Lebanon as a country of dialogue and coexistence, where those from many religions, sects and beliefs coexist.

Edward Alam, a professor at the Notre Dame University near Beirut and one of the organizers of the LDC initiative, says that the next step will include "an electronic petition addressed to the UN Secretary that will be signed by Lebanese, people of Lebanese descent, friends and people who believe in dialogue as a tool to nonviolent transformation," as well as a "tour to promote the initiative in the main countries that have sizable Lebanese diasporas."

Alam admitted that critics could find the idea of Lebanon's deeply divided society being a model for dialogue strange considering ongoing tensions. "We are not denying that Lebanon continues to struggle for peace, but Lebanon continues to also see dialogue as an indispensable tool. Even in the midst of active warfare, there were efforts for dialogue inside and outside Lebanon … We feel that Lebanon is positioned historically, geopolitically, culturally to be that land [of dialogue] especially in our part of the world."

So far, among other moves, a Brazilian branch of the LDC has been launched under the leadership of Denise Milan, one of Brazil's top artists. She organized a conference last year — backed by the Brazilian government — that aimed to

top Brazilian endocrinologist and former vice president of the International Diabetes Federation, is perhaps emblematic of this shift. “At the age of four or five my mother said ‘you are going to be a doctor,’” he says. “My father had a store selling clothes and his great dream was for his children to study. They worked and we studied.” While the second and third generations of those original expats were now firmly embedded and moving into the professions, the continued struggles in Lebanon caused yet more waves of emigrants — with many following family members to Brazil. Yet this generation was no longer painting on an empty canvas — Brazil had grown and opportunities were sparser than a few decades previous.

highlight the Lebanese diaspora and encourage dialogue. “We didn’t want to talk about conflict, we wanted to talk about coexistence. [We aim to] highlight Lebanon in the Middle East as a place where coexistence exists — even with all the problems they have. If we can pass this message strongly, it can be very important for the Middle East.”

While some more recent immigrants have managed to build empires, more often they have found themselves frustrated. The parents of Samir Yazbek, one of the country’s top playwrights, were deeply disappointed shortly after arriving in the 1950s. In ‘The Cedar Leaves,’ one of his most famous works, Yazbek recalls how his father’s desperate dreams of making a fortune ripped the family apart. “He travelled all over the country looking for work, starting in São Paulo in textiles, then moving to the northeast to work in construction. In the end he went looking for gold in the north, leaving us behind in São Paulo.” Did he find any? “No,” he smiles, “he ended up working in a hydroelectric dam.”

Even if Yazbek succeeded, his father’s story of frustration and failure was typical of the later generation of immigrants. Relatively few that arrived in that period have risen to the upper echelons of society.

**A new identity**

Nowadays, the extent of Lebanese influence in Brazil is also matched by their integration. Far from being the closed community that critics called their forefathers, the Lebanese community is now highly mixed into society, intermarriage is incredibly common, while few speak even the basics of Arabic.

Kirby puts this transformation down to a process of emigration into an open society such as Brazil’s. She stresses that now Lebanese–Brazilian identity is more of a form of recognition that can help open doors with

other members of the community but little more than that. “At the start they organized as a community, as did the Italians, the Japanese and other groups. Over time they integrated into the economic and social fabric. Because they were successful, what was a community transformed into a network.”

In economics, politics, the arts and many other fields, those of Lebanese origin now occupy some of the top rungs of the ladder. Yet their primary identity is now that of Brazilian, with their family origins a secondary factor. Ramiro Fajuri, sales director of Chams magazine that focuses on the Arab diaspora in Brazil, puts it another way. He says that while Lebanese–Brazilians are usually incredibly proud of their heritage, these roots are now only a small part of their identity.

Fajuri, who points out that his wife is Brazilian of Japanese descent, thinks this confidence in themselves makes them happy in their identities. “We couldn’t keep the language but we kept some culture, the traditions, the social clubs,” he says. “I guess this is what [Amin] Maalouf meant.”

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Joe Dyke

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