Artigo

Arabs in Brazil: an overview of a half of a millennium relationship

Árabes no Brasil: uma visão geral de uma relação de meio milênio

Árabes en Brasil: una visión general de una relación de medio milênio

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a concise historical overview of Arab-Brazilian relations, spanning nearly five centuries, to serve as an accessible entry point for scholars new to this field of study. It presents a structured framework that divides this evolving relationship into six distinct periods, each characterized by successive waves of Arab and Muslim migration to Brazil, beginning in the 16th century and continuing into the present day. By examining these key phases, the study highlights the cultural, economic, and political influences that have shaped Arab-Brazilian interactions over time, offering valuable insights for researchers exploring this complex and dynamic historical connection.
Keywords: *Arab-Brazilian relations; Latin America–Middle East relations; Arab diaspora*

RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta uma visão histórica concisa das relações árabe-brasileiras, abrangendo quase cinco séculos, servindo como um ponto de entrada acessível para pesquisadores que ingressam nesse campo de estudo. Ele propõe um quadro estruturado que divide essa relação em seis períodos distintos, cada um marcado por sucessivas ondas de migração árabe e muçulmana para o Brasil, desde o século XVI até os dias atuais. Ao examinar essas fases-chave, o estudo destaca as influências culturais, econômicas e políticas que moldaram as interações árabe-brasileiras ao longo do tempo, oferecendo insights valiosos para pesquisadores que exploram essa complexa e dinâmica conexão histórica.
Palavras-chave: *relações árabe-brasileiras; relações América Latina-Oriente Médio; diáspora árabe*

RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece una visión histórica concisa de las relaciones entre árabes y brasileños, abarcando casi cinco siglos, con el objetivo de servir como un punto de entrada accesible para investigadores nuevos en este campo de estudio. Presenta un marco estructurado

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que divide esta relación en evolución en seis períodos distintos, cada uno caracterizado por sucesivas oleadas de migración árabe y musulmana a Brasil, desde el siglo XVI hasta la actualidad. Al examinar estas fases clave, el estudio resalta las influencias culturales, económicas y políticas que han moldeado las interacciones árabe-brasileñas a lo largo del tiempo, proporcionando valiosos conocimientos para los investigadores que exploran esta conexión histórica compleja y dinámica.

Palabras clave: *relaciones árabe-brasileñas; relaciones América Latina-Oriente Medio; diáspora árabe*

Introduction

Arab-Brazilian relations constitute a fundamental aspect of the politics and sociability of the Global South. To fully grasp the intricate web of exchanges and interdependencies that gave rise to the very concept of the Global South1, one must inevitably examine the historical development of this relationship. The Arab-Muslim presence in Brazil has been a subject of scholarly interest in the Social Sciences since the early 20th century, featuring prominently in foundational works such as Gilberto Freyre's *The Masters and the Slaves* (1956) and Manoelito de Ornellas' *Gaúchos e Beduínos* (2012), among others. It reflects "a large history of transnational cultural struggles, migration stories, and battles over race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, and the State" (Amar, 2014, p. 9). Nonetheless, scholars examining this subject must navigate a series of challenges, including the scarcity—or even the complete absence—of historiographical works, diplomatic reports, and bibliographical resources. Additionally, the relative alienation imposed by centuries of colonial domination, along with the persistent Western-centric perspectives that continue to shape Political and Social Sciences in general, and International Relations (IR) in particular, cannot be overlooked. Once researchers take their initial steps into this field, they are confronted with a fundamental challenge: determining where to begin their study.

To assist newcomers in this field in navigating the complex 500-year history of Arab-Brazilian relations, this article proposes a straightforward roadmap that divides this relationship into six distinct periods. These phases, which are sometimes successive and sometimes overlapping, remain dynamic and are thus characterized as "waves." Our objective is to provide a historical overview that allows those unfamiliar with the subject to engage with Arab-Brazilian relations in a structured manner. To this end, we have developed a framework that narrates the long history of interactions between Arabs and Brazilians as "waves of arrivals," which we define as follows[3]:

Waves of Arab(ness)-ic-Muslims arrivals in Brazil
1) Arabness/Arabic arrives (16th century)
2) Arab peoples arrive (19th/20th century)
3) Arab(ic) literature arrives (19th/20th century)
4) Arab oil and money arrive (1970s)
5) Arab heads of state arrive (2005)
6) Arab studies arrive (2000s)

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3 This periodization was proposed by Dr. Ferabolli in 2023 in different talks and conferences. See: "What happens when Paulo Freire meets the Arab World?" at Columbia University; "African – Middle Eastern – Latin American Relations: A Study of Five Centuries of Arab-Muslim Presence in Brazil" at Yale University; "Five centuries of Arab-Muslim presence in Latin America" at the BRISMES Annual Meeting; "Relações Árabes-Brasileiras: Cinco Séculos de História" at Universidade Federal de Pelotas.

In the following pages, we illustrate how these waves have shaped the five-century-long presence of Arabs in Brazil.

The arrival of Arabness/ Arabic (16th century)

Arabness arrived in Brazil alongside the first colonizers, who came from the Iberian Peninsula—a region where, for centuries, Arabic functioned as the lingua franca of intellectual, scientific, and cultural exchange in both the Mediterranean and the Iberian world (González-Ferrín, 2018). Moreover, it is assumed that some of the sailors in the fleet led by Pedro Álvares Cabral were of Arab or moçárabe origin. As a colony integrated into the Portuguese Empire and later part of the Iberian Union (1580–1640), Brazil was deeply influenced by an Iberian historical and social context that had been profoundly shaped by eight centuries of Arab presence (Ferabolli, 2023).

If Arab-Brazilian relations can be traced back to the arrival of the first European colonizers in the New World, the presence of the Arabic language in Brazil predates the formal Arab immigration to the continent. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, approximately five million Africans were brought to Brazil through the Atlantic slave trade, among whom were thousands of Muslims with some degree of Arabic literacy. As a result, Arabic became a language of political organization among enslaved African Muslims in Brazil. Evidence of Arab literacy and Islamic ceremonies performed by enslaved Africans, in which the Arabic language played a central role, can be traced back to the 18th century. Brazil, which gained independence from Portugal in 1822, was the last country in the world to abolish legal slavery,

in 1888. Reis (1986) highlights that enslaved individuals from the Gold Coast included significant numbers of Muslims, "especially Malinkes, here called Mandingos" (Reis, 1986, p. 111). Inter-ethnic wars and conflicts between West and Central African kingdoms played a significant role in the capture and trafficking of enslaved peoples. From the late 18th to the late 19th century, and particularly due to the expansion of Islam in West Africa, large numbers of Hausa, Yoruba (referred to as *Nagôs* in Brazil), Minas, and neighboring Muslim communities were brought to Brazil (Reis, 1986).

Hausa and Yoruba individuals, many of whom were literate in Arabic at a time when most of the Brazilian elite remained illiterate, played a central role in the Malês Uprising (Revolta dos Malês), the largest insurrection of enslaved Africans in Brazilian history. The revolt took place in Salvador, Bahia, in January 1835 and involved at least 600 Africans (Reis, 1986). Although the violent suppression of the Malês Uprising failed to eradicate Islamic practices among enslaved Africans, it forced practitioners to adopt significant measures of secrecy and discretion to avoid detention, torture, and execution. Despite confiscations, arrests, and purges, an underground Islamic presence persisted in Salvador and even in Rio de Janeiro, then the imperial capital. Furthermore, many Hausa, Yoruba, and Minas, among others, were sold to slave owners in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost province, bordering Uruguay and Argentina. In October 1838, police forces in Porto Alegre disrupted what they described as a Black Mina club and confiscated Arabic handwritten documents from its members (Reis, Gomes, & Carvalho, 2020).

In 1866, the Ottoman Imam Abd al--Rahman al-Baghdadi arrived in Rio de Ja-

neiro, where he established connections with African Muslims who sought his guidance and invited him to preach for their communities (Al-Baghdadi, 2007). Similarly, in 1869, Count Gobineau, then the French ambassador to Brazil, reported that two French booksellers in the country sold up to a hundred copies of the Qur'an annually (Gobineau apud Costa e Silva, 2004). The accounts of Al-Baghdadi and Gobineau may reflect a broader shift in Brazilian society during the second half of the 19th century, as a more liberalizing socio-political environment began to emerge. This period saw the gradual erosion of the Catholic Church's once absolute authority over the country's religious landscape. It is no coincidence that, by the early 20th century, authors as distinct as the journalist and writer João do Rio and the anthropologist Nina Rodrigues documented the presence of Islamic communities in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, respectively (Costa e Silva, 2004).

The arrival of Arab peoples (19th/20th century)

The aforementioned context, coupled with the declared interest of Emperor Dom Pedro II in the so-called Orient—which led him to undertake two journeys to the Levant and Egypt between 1871 and 1876—encouraged the migration of Arab Christians from that region to Brazil. This first large influx of Arab populations into the country consisted primarily of Syrians (peoples of *Bilad al-Sham*), who arrived legally as Ottoman citizens. This status explains the collective epithet "turcos" (Turks), which was applied to them—a designation that persists to this day. However, given that most of these migrants were proud Arabs who spoke

Arabic and, in some cases, may have chosen migration to escape oppression under the Sultan's rule, the label was undoubtedly unwelcome. Nonetheless, they established themselves in urban centers as shop owners and merchants, while in rural areas, they worked as itinerant salesmen (*mascates*).

The Arab immigrants from the Ottoman Empire differed significantly from the preceding waves of Arabic-speaking populations from Africa. First, they were freemen, eligible for Brazilian citizenship, and upon their arrival, they enjoyed the same legal prerogatives as other free subjects of the Empire. Second, they were Christians of various denominations, all of whom had legal status in Brazil. Although many of the early Arab immigrants viewed their journey as a temporary endeavor to accumulate wealth before returning home, others sought to establish a new life in Brazil. Finally, and no less importantly, the vast majority of these immigrants were adult men. Women and children remained in their native lands, either awaiting the return of their husbands and fathers or the call to join them in Brazil.

Regarding the formalization of Arab-Brazilian relations at the state level, Egypt was the first Arab country to establish diplomatic ties with Brazil in 1923. By that time, thousands of Arab immigrants were arriving at Brazilian ports. However, these migration waves were significantly more diverse than those of the 19th century. Not only did the arrival of entire families become more common, but the profile of migrants also varied considerably, with a growing number of Muslims choosing Brazil as their new home. This shift was particularly opportune, as Latin America experienced rapid economic growth throughout much of the 20th century and had a sustained demand for

a qualified workforce. While the United States and European countries imposed strict immigration restrictions, Brazil and its neighbors maintained relatively open policies, imposing fewer or no significant barriers to the arrival and settlement of foreign migrants.

The arrival of Arab(ic) literature (19th/20th centuries)

Alongside the movement of people, a parallel exchange of ideas began between the two regions, exemplified by the creation of Arabic literary clubs, Arabic-language press, and the development of *Al-Mahjar Al-Janubi* literature—the term used to describe Arab diasporic literature produced in Latin America. The establishment of numerous literary and cultural institutions, such as literary societies, cultural clubs, newspapers, and magazines, by Arab immigrants across the Americas, particularly in Brazil, suggests that, beyond economic and religious motivations, political factors also played a significant role in the Arab diaspora to the New World. During the 19th century, as European-born ideas of nationalism, parliamentary democracy, and freedom of speech spread to regions under Ottoman rule, they found an enthusiastic audience among the prosperous and well-educated upper and middle classes in Arab lands. Office workers, teachers, professors, journalists, and other urban intellectuals eagerly sought to benefit from the dissemination of these modernizing ideas. However, this enthusiasm was met with swift and violent repression by Ottoman authorities, who were unwilling to tolerate ideologies that could threaten their rule. Banishment and exile of nonconformists became a primary strategy employed by the Ottoman regime to maintain order (Jafarov & Ibrahimova, 2015).

North America—particularly the United States—and South America—most notably Brazil and Argentina—became preferred destinations for freedom-seeking Arab exiles. Facing harsh conditions in these new lands, they relied primarily on values such as hard work and strong familial and communal bonds. As a result, the preservation of cultural and national identity became central to the very survival of these communities. Communal and religious leaders, businessmen, teachers, and poets played a crucial role in shaping the diaspora as a meaningful and cohesive social universe for its members. Additionally, many of them took on an outward-facing role, actively engaging with educated members of the native societies. Through these interactions, they helped foster a more respectful and receptive attitude toward their fellow immigrants, contributing to the broader acceptance of Arab communities in their host countries (Jafarov & Ibrahimova, 2015).

The Arab diaspora in the Americas gave rise to a distinct literary tradition that is now recognized as an integral part of Arabic literature: Arab Mahjar literature. In Brazil, the leading figures of *Al-Mahjar al-Janubi* included Fevzi al-Maluf, Shafig al-Maluf, Riyad al-Maluf, Michel al-Maluf, Geysar al-Maluf, Rashid Selim al-Khouri, Fariz Najm, Farah Maluf, Stefan Galburni, Taufik Duoun, Jamil Safady, Jorge Safady, Wadih Safady, Nami Jafet, Taufik Kurban, Said Abu Jamra, and Miguel Nimer. These writers published books, organized literary recitals, and founded cultural societies, newspapers, and magazines. Among these societies, *Al-Usbatu-l-Andalusia*, or the Society of Andaluzia, based in São Paulo, was the most renowned (Karam, 2014; Jafarov & Ibrahimova, 2015; Pinto, 2016).

The arrival of Arab oil and money (1970s)

The oil crisis of the 1970s struck Brazil like a meteor, profoundly impacting a country that, like much of Latin America, was at the height of its industrialization process. The success of the entire Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) strategy depended on a steady supply of affordable oil from the Middle East. When oil prices skyrocketed, a heavily indebted Latin America, with limited foreign exchange reserves, had little choice but to propose barter agreements with certain Arab countries. It was during this period that Brazil and Iraq emerged as key players in a remarkably mutually beneficial history of South-South cooperation—decades before the term became a widely recognized concept. Iraqi-Brazilian relations in the 1970s and 1980s encompassed a broad spectrum of economic and strategic collaborations, including: a) The operations of the Brazilian Petroleum Corporation (Petrobras) in Iraq, where Petrobras/Braspetro discovered the Majnoon Oil Field in 1975—one of the richest oilfields in the world; b) The export of thousands of motor vehicles to Iraq, many of which can still be seen on the streets of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities; c) The reliable supply of Brazilian food products, solidifying Brazil as one of the most important food suppliers to the Arab world—a role it continues to play today; d) The development of large-scale infrastructure projects by the Brazilian company Mendes Júnior; e) The provision of materials and defense equipment to the Iraqi military by the Brazilian defense industry; f) The establishment of nuclear cooperation between the two countries.

It was also during this period that Brazil established its embassy in Jeddah, formally initiating diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, which remains Brazil's principal trading partner in the Middle East today (Brazilian Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, 2024). Within this geopolitical context, in 1975, Brazil supported a motion in the United Nations General Assembly that defined Zionism as a form of racism. This move aligns with what some scholars refer to as "oil diplomacy" (Hartshorn, 1973, p. 281), a strategic approach aimed at safeguarding Brazilian energy interests amid soaring oil prices.

The arrival of Arab heads of state (2005)

In December 2003, former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva visited the headquarters of the League of Arab States. Together with Amr Moussa, then Secretary-General of the Arab League, Lula da Silva laid the groundwork for the institutionalization of Arab-South American relations. Less than two years later, in March 2005, the First Summit of Arab-South American Countries (ASPA) was convened, facilitating various forms of cooperation between the two regions, including the Framework Agreement on Economic Cooperation between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Mercosur (Ferabolli, 2021a). The institutions established around the ASPA Summit, such as BibliAspa (Library of South America and Arab Countries), directed by Paulo Daniel Elias Farah, the Federation of Arab-South American Chambers of Commerce, and the ASPA Business Forum, aim to promote the exchange of capital, goods, people, and ideas across the Arab–South American interregional space. To date, four ASPA summits have been held: Brasília (2005), Doha (2009), Lima (2012), and Riyadh (2015).

The Arab Spring and the disintegration of the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) brought the ASPA system to a standstill. Nevertheless, interregional trade increased from just over US$ 13 billion in 2005 to nearly US$ 35 billion in 2015 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [Brazil], 2015). More recently, data compiled by the Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce revealed that trade between Brazil alone and the Arab world reached US$ 30 billion in 2023 (ANBA, 2024). As for the GCC--Mercosur Framework Agreement—one of the most highly celebrated outcomes of the ASPA Summit—negotiations have stalled. This stagnation is largely attributed to three key factors: the excessive concentration of trade relations between Saudi Arabia and Brazil, the lack of mechanisms to attract investments from Gulf sovereign wealth funds to Mercosur, and the exclusivist practice of facilitating economic engagement solely between actors linked to export and investment sectors (Ferabolli, 2021b).

The arrival of Arab studies in Brazilian academia (2000s)

Although the origins of scholarly Arab(ic) studies in Brazil can be traced back to 1951—when the University of São Paulo formalized the Arabic course previously offered informally by Jamil Sáfady in the 1940s—it was only at the turn of the 21st century that Brazilian Social Sciences made a concerted effort to understand the Middle East, particularly the Arab world. A pioneering initiative in this regard was the establishment of the Center for Middle East Studies (NEOM) in 2003 by Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto and Paul Amar, within the Graduate Program in Anthropology (PPGA) at Fluminense Federal University (UFF) in Rio

de Janeiro. This was followed in 2006 by the inauguration of two disciplinary fields of inquiry—Arab History and Philosophy—within the Arabic Language, Literature, and Culture program at the University of São Paulo (USP). The establishment of the first graduate-level research group on the International Relations of the Arab World, certified by the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), took place in 2018 at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) under the coordination of Silvia Ferabolli. In 2021, the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais (PUC Minas) launched Brazil's first degree program specializing in the International Relations of the Middle East. This initiative emerged within the framework of the Middle East and Maghreb Study Group (GEOMM), founded in 2011 by Danny Zahreddine, professor in the Department of International Relations at PUC Minas and coordinator of the aforementioned program.

Another significant development in this broader movement toward a deeper engagement with the Arab world was the founding of Tabla Publishing House in 2020. Dedicated to publishing works by Middle Eastern—primarily Arab—authors, Tabla has contributed to expanding access to literature from the region within the Brazilian academic and cultural spheres.[4] Regarding broader Arab-Latin American relations, in August 2023, the First International Conference Arab Latinos! was held at the Federal University of Sergipe (UFS) in Brazil. This event marked the first open conference within a program launched in 2022 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific

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4 On the study of the Middle East in Brazil see Clemesha; Ferabolli (2020).

and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), bringing together five countries: Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and Chile. According to the initiative's scientific coordinator, Geraldo Adriano Campos, "[t]his project aims to bring together, strengthen, give visibility to, and promote ties between Arab and Latin American countries, as well as civil societies in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Arab world" (UFS-BR, 2023). Finally, amid the ongoing war in Gaza and the global debate it has sparked on academic freedom, genocide, and human rights, the University of São Paulo (USP) is set to launch the Center for Palestinian Studies (CEPal) in October 2024, under the direction of Arlene Clemesha.

This account is by no means exhaustive; rather, it serves as a brief overview of the efforts within Brazilian Social Sciences to engage in knowledge production *on* and *with* the Arab world.

Conclusion

"You're not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop." This saying from the Islamic scholar Jalaluddin Mohammad Rumi (1207–1273), evokes the idea of vastness contained within a single individual. In the context of this study, it underscores the magnitude of the half-millennium-long relationship between Arabs and Brazilians—not merely a drop in the ocean of South-South relations, but a relationship that encapsulates within itself the very essence of this broader dynamic. This is precisely why we have chosen the metaphor of waves to describe the ever-evolving movements—rising and falling, advancing and retreating—that characterize the Arab presence in Brazil. It is also important to note that from the outset, Arabs and Brazilians have not

primarily engaged with one another through the modern constructs of state, sovereignty, or diplomacy. Rather, their connection has been shaped by deeper and more enduring categories: culture, language, and faith. The very fact that Arabness and the Arabic language preceded the physical presence of Arab peoples on Brazilian soil—at a time when the land was not even called Brazil—serves as a reminder of the fluid and dynamic nature of Arab-Brazilian relations. As Brazil gradually constructed itself both politically and ideationally as an independent nation-state, it began receiving its first contingents of Arab immigrants. Alongside Indigenous peoples, Africans, Portuguese, Italians, Spaniards, Germans, and Japanese, Arabs became a foundational component of the imagined community that defines Brazilian national identity. Arab immigrants established social and literary circles, recreational societies, newspapers, magazines, and other institutions that enabled them to secure prominent social, political, and cultural roles within their new homeland. Not only have Arab immigrants successfully integrated into Brazilian society, but they have also played a transformative role in shaping the country's landscape. One notable example is the Syrian-Lebanese Hospital in São Paulo, one of the top two private hospitals in Brazil and among the top five in Latin America. Conceived by a group of Syrian-Lebanese women in the 1920s, the hospital became a reality through the efforts of São Paulo's large Arab community, officially opening in 1965. In the political sphere, Brazilians of Arab descent have made significant contributions at the highest levels of government. Notable figures include Simone Tebet (Minister of Planning, 2023–present), Fernando Haddad (Minister of Finance, 2023–present), Geraldo Alckmin

(Vice President of Brazil, 2023–present), Alexandre Kalil (Mayor of Belo Horizonte, 2017–2022), Paulo Maluf (Governor of São Paulo, 1979–1982), Michel Temer (President of Brazil, 2016–2018), Guilherme Boulos (Federal Deputy and candidate for Mayor of São Paulo in 2024), Gilberto Kassab (Secretary of Government and Institutional Relations of the State of São Paulo, 2023–present), and Tasso Jereissati (Governor of Ceará, 1987–1991). These are just a few among the many Brazilians of Arab descent who have played prominent roles in national politics.

A comprehensive portrayal of Arab-Brazilian relations would be incomplete without acknowledging the pivotal role of the Arab Brazilian Chamber of Commerce (CCAB) in fostering trade between Brazil and the twenty-two member states of the League of Arab States. Likewise, the contributions of scholars, writers, and translators such as Safa Jubran, Mamede Jarouche, and Michel Sleiman have been instrumental in promoting Arab literature in Brazil. However, a true depiction of these relations must also account for their more complex and contentious aspects. Funk (2024), for instance, warns that the increasing export of Brazilian (and, more broadly, Latin American) agricultural commodities to the Middle East, while enhancing food security in the Arab region, comes at the cost of various forms of political and environmental insecurity in Brazil. These include "buttressing far-right political actors, promoting the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and provoking widespread deforestation in the Amazon" (Funk, 2024, p. 28). With the recent wave of Arab-Muslim migration to Brazil, largely driven by the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the country has encountered a form of racism that was previously unfamiliar: Islamophobia. This development has prompted scholars across Brazil to critically engage with the intersection of religion and race, as well as the pressing issue of Islamophobia as a manifestation of racism. Moreover, the current Brazilian government's stance on the Gaza War—particularly President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's vocal advocacy for an immediate ceasefire and his condemnation of the genocide perpetrated by Israeli forces—has drawn intense criticism from right-wing factions within the country. These groups, which claim both political and religious ties to Israel, are the same voices that seek to suppress racial and gender minorities, undermine social movements such as the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), and obstruct the struggle of Indigenous Brazilian peoples against the destruction of their ways of life and livelihoods. Truly, the Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation is seen by many as a model to be emulated in their own struggle against the forces of oppression within Brazilian society. In this sense, we may be witnessing the emergence of a new wave of arrival—one shaped by highly politicized Arab individuals whose presence could deepen the cross-fertilization between Arab and Brazilian leftist thought and activism. Whether this vision will materialize remains to be seen. Yet, as Rumi reminds us, "Everything waits for its time."

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Urban Trajectories and political experiences of Migrants in São Paulo: The Case of "Al Janiah" Workers, a Cultural and Gastronomic Space in the City

Trajetórias Urbanas e Experiências Políticas de Migrantes em São Paulo: O Caso dos Trabalhadores do "Al Janiah", um Espaço Cultural e Gastronômico na Cidade

Trayectorias Urbanas y Experiencias Políticas de Migrantes en São Paulo: El Caso de los Trabajadores de "Al Janiah", un Espacio Cultural y Gastronómico en la Ciudad

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the urban trajectories of migrants and refugees within Al Janiah, a Palestinian-founded cultural and gastronomic space in São Paulo, Brazil. Functioning as a restaurant, bar, and cultural hub, it fosters integration through music, workshops, and language classes, attracting a diverse audience. Through interviews with six workers, the research explores sociability, network formation, and integration processes. Findings show that relationships at Al Janiah facilitate professional opportunities and urban navigation. Shifting from ethnic or legal frameworks, this study approaches migration through urban spaces, highlighting Al Janiah's role in city-making and supporting displaced populations in São Paulo.
Key words: Migration; Urban trajectories; São Paulo.

RESUMO

Este estudo examina as trajetórias urbanas de migrantes e refugiados no Al Janiah, um espaço cultural e gastronômico fundado por palestinos em São Paulo, Brasil. Funcionando como restaurante, bar e centro cultural, ele promove a integração por meio da música,

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workshops e aulas de idiomas, atraindo um público diversificado. A pesquisa, baseada em entrevistas com seis trabalhadores, explora a sociabilidade, a formação de redes e os processos de integração. Os resultados mostram que as relações no Al Janiah facilitam oportunidades profissionais e a navegação urbana. Ao invés de abordagens étnicas ou legais, o estudo analisa a migração através dos espaços urbanos, destacando o papel do Al Janiah na construção da cidade e no apoio às populações deslocadas em São Paulo. Palavras chave: Migração; Trajetórias Urbanas; São Paulo.

RESUMEN

Este estudio examina las trayectorias urbanas de migrantes y refugiados en Al Janiah, un espacio cultural y gastronómico fundado por palestinos en São Paulo, Brasil. Funcionando como restaurante, bar y centro cultural, promueve la integración a través de la música, talleres y clases de idiomas, atrayendo a un público diverso. La investigación, basada en entrevistas con seis trabajadores, explora la sociabilidad, la formación de redes y los procesos de integración. Los resultados muestran que las relaciones en Al Janiah facilitan oportunidades profesionales y la navegación urbana. En lugar de enfoques étnicos o legales, el estudio analiza la migración a través de los espacios urbanos, destacando el papel de Al Janiah en la construcción de la ciudad y en el apoyo a las poblaciones desplazadas en São Paulo. Palabras clave: Migración; Trayectorias urbanas; São Paulo.

Introduction

The interaction between people from various places of the world has become increasingly common in the urban life of São Paulo in recent years. Like other Brazilian cities, in the 2000s, the São Paulo capital became part of the migration routes from different countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas. Notably, there was an increase of over 13.236,3% in asylum requests in Brazil between 2010 and 2019, rising from 619 requests to 82.552; According to the Brazilian Federal Police registry, which counts the total number of immigrants with regular residence visas in the country, 46,055 new registrations were made in 2010. In 2023, this number jumped to 201,932 registrations. In other words, there was more than a fourfold increase in the number of new residence visas during this period.[5]

These people come from Haiti, Senegal, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Haiti, and especially Venezuela, among other countries[6]. In general, national statistics follow the global trend of exponential and increasing displacement, with the exception of the COVID-19 pandemic period when this trend decreased, resuming in 2022. After Roraima, São Paulo is the main state with asylum requests, having 13.787 applications in 2023. Unlike the northern region of Brazil, where the flow is mainly due to geographical reasons, with almost 80% of Brazilian refugees coming from territories in the northern part of South America (notably Venezuela and Cuba in 2022), São Paulo, particularly its capital, attracts due to its urban characteristics and the wide range of work and hou-

5 Brazilian legislation, following international law guidelines, differentiates between immigrants and refugees, who have distinct statuses and rights. People classified as immigrants are not included in the cited statistics. Information available at <https://www.datamigraweb.unb.br/>, 04/06/2024.

6 Information and data available at: <http://www.justica.gov.br/noticias/brasil-tem-quase-9-mil-refugiados-de-79-nacionalidades-1> and <http://pt.slideshare.net/justicagovbr/sistema-de-refgio brasileiro-balano-at-abril-de-2016>. Access date: 03/06/2024.

sing opportunities, both formal and informal (Junger da Silva et al, 2023).[7]

São Paulo appears as a destination for many migrants, leading the topic to become a subject of journalistic and cinematic productions, debates in various political and social spaces, and raising questions about existing public policies.

In light of this new scenario, there has been an expansion and creation of institutions to welcome and assist these newly arrived groups with international and national funding. The Coordination of Immigrant Policy of the São Paulo City Hall, established in 2013, created a reference center and shelter specifically for this public, but much of the assistance work continued to be carried out by non-governmental and religious organizations. These institutions provide support and protection for newly arrived migrants, offering help with documentation, housing, employment, language learning, and other social assistance services. Although there are particularities in the services provided by each of these NGOs, making them often complementary, certain organizations have become key references for migrant networks of specific nationalities.

Despite the existence of a support network for migrants in São Paulo, these people face many difficulties in their urban experience, particularly regarding access to housing, both due to the documentary requirements of rental contracts and the rental prices; also facing problems such as employment and income generation. In other words, many of them end up facing the same problems of precarious housing, employment, and access to services and urban spaces that most of São Paulo's inhabitants experience. The relationship of migrants in the production of urban spaces in São Paulo and the operation of transnational networks was addressed in the works of Silva (2008 and 2015), Cortes (2013), and Minvielle (2018), specifically among groups connected to sewing workshops (Silva, 2008; Cortes, 2013) and the informal economy (Silva, 2015; Minvielle, 2018). Thus, despite not starting from national categories, the authors ended up focusing on specific migratory dynamics and routes, mainly encompassing people from South American countries, Koreans, Chinese, and Africans.

As a form to analyze the migrant condition Glick-Schiller and Çaglar (2015, p.5) puts them at the same level of the other inhabitants of the city. It's about stating the obvious; migrants are people that face the same adversities as other inhabitants of the metropolis[8], aug-

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7 There is an extensive field of discussion in the sociology of migration that addresses the ways in which classificatory categories of people in mobility are used. Terms such as immigrant, emigrant, refugee, asylum seeker, and migrant, among many other variations, aim to characterize the person in mobility, highlighting one or another aspect of their relationship with territory, states, and citizenship. Some critics point to the explanatory emptiness of the immigrant/emigrant dichotomy (the one who leaves and the one who arrives in a new territory), as circulatory mobilities challenge the notion of multiple belongings or an understanding strictly focused on economic reasons as the drivers of mobility. Others criticize the methodological nationalism implicit in the idea of refugee or asylum seeker, blurring the boundaries between the different reasons that compelled the person to leave their places of origin, whether economic problems, wars, environmental exhaustion, or various persecutions. To circumvent this debate, in this article, we will refer to the set of people in mobility as migrants, highlighting the variants related to refuge. (Çaglar and Glick-Schiller, 2018).

8 To illustrate this reality, we recommend watching the film "Era of Hotel Cambridge" directed by Eliana Caffé (2016). The film is set in São Paulo, where newly arrived refugees in Brazil share an old abandoned building in downtown São Paulo with a group of homeless people. In addition to the daily tension caused by the threat of eviction, the new residents of the building have to deal with their personal dramas and learn to live with people who, despite their differences, face life on the streets together. We highlight a scene from the film where a Palestinian refugee character playfully says, "I'm a palestinian refugee in Brazil, you are 'Brazilian refugees' in Brazil," precisely portraying that they are in the same vulnerable condition in the city, regardless of national origin.

mented by a new set of issues related to the personal and collective histories that put them in mobility (persecutions, poverty, wars, environmental disasters, etc.). These difficulties are directly or indirectly related to the capitalist dynamics of urban space production, which create forms of dispossession (Harvey, 2017), expulsion, and displacement (Sassen, 2014).

It is in this context that Al Janiah, a restaurant and cultural center in downtown São Paulo, emerges as an important case to materialize this reality of refuge in the city within a microspace. First it is important to understand that Al Janiah was chosen as the main spatiality because as a restaurant, bar and cultural center built by Palestinians, proved to be in itself a space that reveals the reality of many refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations. Located in Bixiga neighborhood, downtown São Paulo, Al Janiah was created by refugees who lived in an informally occupied building (therefore, not recognized by the public authorities of the city of São Paulo) in the Liberdade neighborhood, downtown São Paulo, called *Ocupação Leila Khaled* in reference to the Palestinian political activist who dedicated her life to the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon[9]. The Occupation Leila Khaled, as an informal urban housing shelter, housing families of Syrian, Palestinian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Bolivian and even Brazilian living in extreme poverty.

It is notable how migrants create new meanings for a city as unequal and oppressive as São Paulo. Articulate migrants build fields of possibility for living and resisting in São Pau-

lo. New worlds are produced through articulations like the one that engendered the Leila Khaled occupation. In this sense, highlighting this type of migrant articulation and connection—rather than naively celebrating a pluralistic and cosmopolitan city—is about recognizing new possible ways of producing life. These articulations in adversity overcome linguistic, cultural, and material boundaries, consolidating new spatialities and political articulation hubs in the city. Despite the fact that Brazil has an inclusive legal apparatus with regard to the reception of foreigners in a vulnerable situation, the reality of the insertion process of these individuals demonstrates that, in practice, such insertion is not positive or fully inclusive. In this sense, looking at Al Janiah reveals pathways of articulation and resistance.

The case of Al Janiah materializes the diffuse and sometimes violent sociological process of integrating refugees and other vulnerable migrants. From the Leila Khaled occupation this migrants created Al Janiah cultural and gastronomic Center as a space for articulating diverse local networks with varied scope, often restricted to specific urban circuits, bringing together displaced people (migrants, refugees and Brazilians) with unequal insertions in the city of São Paulo. Generally speaking, it is precisely because of this unifying character, that Al Janiah has become an important territory for encounters and opportunities for those seeking to establish themselves in São Paulo. They are people who carry out the most varied activities: music, handicrafts, gastronomy workshops, Arabic and Portuguese language classes.

From this space, understood here as a privileged point of observation of the daily life of different groups and people in the city, we interviewed six migrants (four men and two

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9 To understand the social dynamics of the Leila Khaled Occupation, we recommend watching the documentary series "Babel SP", created by André Amparo and produced by Samantha Capdeville, released by HBO and Filmegraph in 2019.

women) with the main objective of understanding the construction processes of sociability, relationships and networks, through which displaced people enter and circulate in São Paulo, as well as reflect on the role played by Al Janiah in this dynamic.

This article is the result of a project financed by the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUCSP) Research Incentive Plan (PIPEq), that we developed in 2020 and 2021, coordinated by Reginaldo Nasser together with a group of researchers[10] that initially consisted in analyzing the trajectories of different origin migrants that worked at Al Janiah, through interviews with these individuals. The aim is to understand not only the conditions of access for these people to the city, in terms of spaces, goods, facilities, and services, but also how they participate in practices that redefine urban spaces, including political mobilizations around the "right to the city", such as the space of Al Janiah.

Besides this overview of São Paulo's migratory situation and the identification of Al Janiah in the city, the article is composed of a theoretical and methodological section that aims to explain the literature that substantiates our understanding of displacement, migration, and the social condition of refugees. Following that, there is an empirical section documenting our research work through interviews with Al Janiah's workers. Finally, we provide an analysis of how the political dimensions of São Paulo city affect the social interactions between them and the city.

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10 In addition to its coordinator: Reginaldo Mattar Nasser, the research team was composed by: Rodrigo Augusto Duarte Amaral, Tiago Rangel Côrtes, Carla Herminia Mustafa Barbosa Ferreira, Isadora Souza, Barbara Cyrillo Blum, Barbara StiubienerAbrahao, Marina Mattar Soukef Nasser, Victória Perino Rosa, Isabella Arca Vieira.

Migration studies from the perspective of city-making

We approach migration studies from the perspective of urban spaces rather than focusing on ethnic, national, or legal groups that are commonly studied in research on displacement, migration, and refugee studies - some theorist such as Saskia Sassen (2014), Michel Agier (2015), Feldman-Bianco (2012; 2015; 2018), Glick-Schiller and Çaglar (2011; 2015; 2018) are examples of academics on which we base the theoretical aspect of our research. By employing these theoretical references, we can develop a broader understanding of migration that allows us to connect phenomena that were previously examined separately as part of the same process linked to the economic and social dynamics of global capitalism. As Feldman-Bianco suggests, "the varieties, scales and spaces of displacement (and immobility) as part of an integrated logic for producing inequalities in the current conjuncture of global capitalism" (2018, p.195) and that seem to reveal "a new logic of expulsion, which perpetuates social inequalities and generates new groups of the marginalized" (Feldman-Bianco, 2018, p. 203). We understand Sassen's (2014) hypothesis of the emergence of a new logic of expulsion in the current phase of the global political economy, reinforces the argument of adopting a global perspective of social displacements, beyond its national and legal differentiations in immigrants, refugees, internally displaced people, homeless people and environmental displaced persons. In this regard, Glick-Schiller and Çaglar (2015) define displacement as a range of different types of mobility that encompass not only cross-border immigration but also the increasing precarity of local residents, facing forms of dispossession such as

unemployment, precarious employment, early retirement, low wages, and evictions.

These approaches challenge and critique the prevalent "methodological nationalism"[11] found in migration studies (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller, 2002) within the field of International Relations. In it, instead of dealing with migration to cities or the life of migrants in cities, it was proposed to analyze the relationship between migrants and the city, understanding the migrant as a social actor who plays a leading role in the global processes that produce, interact and restructure the urban spaces. Therefore, criticizing approaches centered on ethnic, national and legal categories, we point to the need to research migrants as active social actors in the cities where they live, favoring the observation of their interaction with other urban characters. Çaglar and Glick-Schiller propose the concept of "city-making" to understand the processes through which cities are continuously shaped and reshaped by various social actors, including migrants. This concept focuses on how cities are not static entities, but are dynamic and evolving, influenced by the actions and interactions of diverse groups and individuals. Through the concept of city-making, the authors provide an understanding of urban transformation, emphasizing the importance of agency and political struggles in the continuous making and remaking of cities (Çaglar and Glick-Schiller, 2018).

The notion of "city-making" underlines the importance of non-governmental actors, such as diverse communities, civil society organizations, social movements, as well as public management itself in interaction with these political actors.

11 For Wimmer and Glick-Schiller (2002, p.301) "Methodological nationalism is understood as the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world".

These are different forces that play an active role in transforming urban space, creating solidarity networks, defending rights and promoting specific demands. The concept developed by Çaglar and Glick-Schiller (2018) is powerful in addressing the transnational dimension of city-making processes, highlighting how migration and transnational connections influence local urban dynamics. Furthermore, by placing disputes at the center of the debate on urban production, the authors highlight the multi-scalar constitution of localities, in which migrants become important operators of these dynamics. Scale operators have the ability to articulate, connect and negotiate different scales of action and mobilization, making it possible to change the status of conflict from something that could be silenced, transforming it into an issue with major social repercussions, which articulates and connects social and power spaces. They play a fundamental role in building and reconfiguring relations between the local, regional, national and transnational levels. This includes actors such as municipal governments, international organizations, multinational companies, social movements, transnational networks and activists, among others. The concept of scale operator highlights the importance of power relations and the capacity for agency of actors at different scales. Operators have the ability to influence and shape governance processes, urban planning, economic development, migration policies, social policies, among many other actions that directly impact people's lives. They play a key role in the construction of ways of emplacement, in the (re)configuration of social and spatial dynamics in cities and beyond.

In this sense, we should think about the condition of vulnerable migration or refugee not based on their national identity, but through their social and political condition. In the case

of Al Janiah, it would not be absurd to assume that the Arab ethnic issue, or even the Islamic religious value, would be the constant in the positive relationship between those who frequent its community. However, what we find when entering the empirical research is that what connects their community are different socioeconomic reasons and there is no prevalence of ethnic sociability, as is often thought. Starting with the diversity of origins of its employees, we find Palestinians, Syrians, Cubans, Algerians and Brazilians. So, what do these have in common?

The research method utilized was the urban and life trajectory of the interviewed characters (Telles, 2006). This is a methodological approach aimed at understanding the complexity of individual experiences over time, particularly within the context of social and economic transformations. The analysis of urban and life trajectories allows for an examination of how individuals experience and respond to changes in their personal, family, professional, and social circumstances. It aims to provide a deep and situated understanding of individuals' lives, highlighting the intersection between individual biography and shared social history, structure, and agency, as well as the complexities of human experiences in a world where translocal mobilities accelerate, and territories come to connect and share daily experiences, even when they are tens of thousands of kilometers apart. New sociabilities are produced, altering political scenes and bringing new fields of local and global action, situated within the specific spatialities of the city.

The proposal for a multi-scalar analysis, as discussed by Çaglar and Glick-Schiller (2018), together with the use of the concepts of agency to examine the city-making of transnational migrants, is based on the construction of a theoretical reference that allows us to see migration

as a complex urban phenomenon that relates to the other inhabitants of the city on multiple and varied scales. In this way, we seek to demonstrate the more or less ephemeral connections that build fields of possibilities and new ways of life. Without losing sight of the specificity of the migrant experience, we believe it is necessary to show how such presences insert other sociabilities and new institutional actors into the logic of urban production, located in other political fields, with another set of knowledge and in different hierarchies of power. These are the processes we are interested in tracing and debating: the alliances and sociabilities that bring together new relationships which leads to the city-making.

Interviewing the Workers of "Al Janiah"12: identifying points of convergence

By the empirical work through the interviews we were able to identify points of convergence. Such points reveal that the description of the difficulty of their insertion in São Paulo was associated less with their cultural and

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12 Between September and December 2020, we interviewed six foreign employees/former employees of the restaurant Al Janiah: four men and two women. They came from Cuba, Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria (2). The interviews were conducted at the physical space of Al Janiah, except for two: one conducted online because the interviewee was traveling, and another conducted at an ice cream shop, the current workplace of one of the interviewees. The interview guide followed the chronological and spatial order of the interviewee's life trajectory. We aimed to structure the interviews considering each life phase, within the context of family, housing, work (and other forms of income generation), education/training, political engagement, activities during free time and leisure, support networks (social or institutional), access to documents, and relationship with nation-states. For ethical reasons, we chose not to name the interviewees. All official documents and reports produced by the research project that inspired this article were submitted to the Research Advisory Board of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo in 2021

ethnic issues and more with aspects related to public policies aimed at immigrants. During this interview process we identified five dimensions: health, documentation, language, housing, and work.

Initially, regarding the health issue, the expectation was that this topic would appear prominently in the reports, given that this research was conducted during the COVID-19 crisis. However, analysis of the interviews revealed that little was said about health issues and the effects of the pandemic on the lives of our interviewees. What did emerge were occasional mentions of the use of the Unified Health System (SUS) in São Paulo. Generally, the interviewees did not report difficulties accessing the SUS for medical appointments and immediate procedures, such as vaccinations. However, they indicated difficulties with treatments and exams that were sometimes necessary due to delays. This is a social issue that affects the general population using the SUS. The only particularity identified in the context of COVID-19 is that the notification of COVID-19 cases to the Municipal or State Health Department, as well as the forwarding of data to the Ministry of Health, does not include a field for nationality. Migrants or refugees, regardless of their legal migration status, may be rendered invisible in pandemic response actions due to not being included in official records, except in cases of death, as the death certificate includes a field for nationality.

Regarding documentation, even though all interviewees reported having managed to regularize themselves in Brazil, obtaining the necessary documentation, some problematic aspects stand out, which indicate bottlenecks in the public bodies that serve or should serve the immigrant population. For example,

we highlight the lack of access to information and communication by the public authorities on document acquisition processes. This sensitive point underscores the need for effective implementation of certain actions outlined in the current Municipal Plan of Policies for Immigrants (2021-2024), such as "expanding and improving the dissemination of information about services provided by the municipality to ensure the dissemination and access to timely information, including for those residing in peripheral regions" (São Paulo, 2020, p. 32).

Another sensitive aspect concerns the communication barriers due to language, which hindered acquiring information and regularizing documentation, especially for interviewees of Arab origin. Although the Municipal Secretariat of Human Rights and Citizenship (SMDHC) created the Reference Center for Immigrant Assistance (CRAI) to provide multilingual support, interviewees reported difficulties because professionals did not speak Arabic or even English in some cases. Similar issues were noted with agencies like the Federal Police, indicating sensitive points in immigrant services.

There were also complaints about excessively bureaucratic and impersonal services in public agencies, which disregard situations of vulnerability and sensitive life trajectories until arrival in Brazil. These issues highlight the need for expanded training and sensitization of professionals serving immigrants and employing immigrants in these roles. This approach improves service quality and promotes labor inclusion. Finally, researchers noted that most interviewees had applied for and obtained refugee status, even though some did not legally qualify or identify as refugees. It became clear that applying for asylum is a more accessible way to regularize status and is therefore widely used.

Regarding the language item, they reported having difficulty communicating in other public services and facilities, as well as in city environments and services. Simple issues such as the correct spelling of the name or affiliation on the identity document can become problematic when one does not have the perception that there are linguistic differences between the Portuguese and other languages, leading to misunderstandings and even further prolonging access to documentation. One interviewee reported that due to an error in one letter of his mother's name, he had to wait months for this situation to be corrected before he could have his identity document properly updated.

São Paulo's Municipal Policy for Immigrants and the Municipal Plan for Migrants (São Paulo, 2020) emphasize respect for diversity, interculturality, and ensuring migrants' access to public services. The Reference Center for Immigrant Assistance, a public municipal facility, provides multilingual staff (including migrants and refugees) to improve understanding of the offered guidance. Linguistic and sociocultural diversity can pose challenges for migrants and refugees seeking information and services from institutions such as public authorities, civil society, and private initiatives. Therefore, the services for migrants and refugees must be accessible in both language and communication style to ensure proper understanding.

From the aspect of urban housing, it appears as a sensitive issue. Most of the interviewees complained about the rent prices, which forced them to move house in short or medium periods of time, mainly in the initial years in São Paulo. Many have gone through precarious and unregulated housing, like Occupation Leila Khaled itself.

Indeed, as shown by the FipeZap index, rental prices in the city increased by 114.8% from January 2008 to November 2019[13]. Research groups and researchers mapped this increase and identified it as one of a series of dispossession processes caused by the expansion of the real estate frontier and the scarcity of housing policies that ensure the right to housing.

It was also noteworthy that none of the interviewees sought medium- and high-complexity social assistance services, such as shelters. It was not possible to identify whether this occurred due to their irregular status, lack of access to information, the precariousness of the shelters, or other reasons. What was known is that all the interviewees had support networks composed of family and/or friends, which they could rely on for housing, even temporarily, suggesting that it was neither necessary nor desired to use public services. Besides staying with family and friends, some immigrants reported living in an occupation where mainly Arabs and Palestinians resided.

Finally, the "work" dimension was the most mentioned by the interviewees. It was common to mention the initial period of insertion in the labor market as a moment of exclusion, precariousness and insecurity. This is because the positions assumed by the interlocutors had little or no labor guarantee and, in some cases, were jobs classified as not decent or dignified. References to "odd Jobs" and intermittent jobs were common, some of them under conditions of low labor protection - without contracts. Work considered illegal or on

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13 The FipeZap index measures the evolution of prices in the Brazilian real estate market, with data disaggregated by municipality. Available at:<https://fipezap.zapimoveis.com.br/> Accessed on 20/04/2024.

the borders of "legal" and "illegal" was also reported, which reinforces, in some cases more than others, the low insertion or exclusion in the labor market.

With regard to the search for work, regularization of personal documents, equal socioeconomic status and difficulty in finding adequate regular housing are transversal elements in the history of all of them. In fact, the very creation of Al Janiah as a workspace is intimately connected with these points of convergence, as Leila Khaled was the first occupation project in the city of São Paulo to have in its initial political project the objective of bringing together newly arrived immigrants in a single building under the banner of the right to the city. If with the occupation, the housing problem had a provisional solution, albeit uncertain due to the always imminent possibility of eviction, the same cannot be said about the work, which follows a pattern of precariousness and instability among all residents of the building, Brazilian or immigrants.

It was from this experience that Al Janiah was born, inaugurated in January 2016, with the proposal to establish itself as a meeting point for activists in São Paulo, while at the same time opening professional opportunities to immigrants/refugees. Initially, this project was restricted to a few Palestinian refugees due to the small number of available jobs. But, as the space grew in activities, it began to incorporate immigrants of other nationalities, in addition to Brazilians living in the peripheries or with histories of displacement.

Recognized, on the one hand, as a political space open to diversity, and on the other, as a place of opportunities for social inclusion, Al Janiah, in just over a year, has become a point of reference for various social groups, immigrants

and localities, with unequal forms of access to the city. Also, because it is a restaurant and cultural house, the space quickly began to attract people from São Paulo who identified with the Palestinian cause, representations of leftist political parties, Brazilian intellectuals, even just supporters and consumers of Arab food. Thus, the space has become a political place, where patrons and staff interact with the public dynamics of São Paulo city, across various spheres. They are active not only in the dimensions of municipal migration policies but also in the city's political life.

The Political Dimension of São Paulo in the Social Interactions Among Al Janiah workers

Finally, we particularly highlight the political role of Al Janiah and its employees involved in various expressions and political mobilizations in the city of São Paulo, with expressions that extend from international political issues, such as the Palestine cause itself, but also Brazilian national political issues, such as a space of opposition to Bolsonarism in Brazil. For these reasons, the Al Janiah and its employees were the targets, more than once, of violent and expressively xenophobic actions. In this sense, the political dimension necessarily emerges in the social experience of Al Janiah and its workers.

On the political dimension, we can categorize three different relevant aspects concerning Al Janiah as a sociopolitical space. First, the individual aspect of its employees identified at the interviews. Here, individual experiences evidently mobilize different perspectives on how they actively participate or not in the political life of the city. Second, Al Janiah as

a meeting point for politically engaged people, particularly aligned with progressive political agendas and political parties identified with the left of the political spectrum, even serving as a meeting place for leftist intellectuals and politicians in the city of São Paulo. Finally, the institutional positioning of Al Janiah as a politically engaged entity with agendas that go beyond migration issues in the city, or the Palestinian cause itself. Underlying this is a fundamental aspect: the identification of the Palestinian cause as a "leftist" agenda[14].

Conversations with each interviewed worker revealed that their experiences and political interests differed. These ranged from cases where the interviewees expressed that they had never been involved in "politics" as an expression of institutional non-involvement and disinterest, to politically engaged cases, mainly focused on two themes: the struggle for the liberation of Palestine and the construction of a better Brazil. This latter group of workers forms part of the activist experience of Al Janiah as a political place where the migrant's resistant experience constitutes its formation. It is no coincidence that it is known for being a space used and frequented by "left-wing" clients.

There are numerous examples of Al Janiah being used as a space for the expression of debates and contemporary political agendas. For instance, take the posts and mobilizations in favor of protests against the genocide in Gaza perpetuated by Israel since October 2023. In this context, Al Janiah has hosted various Brazilian intellectuals and public figures who discuss or defend Palestinian self-determination, Israeli political violence against Palestinian lives, among other topics, such as Arlene Clemesha (professor at the University of São Paulo), Thiago Ávila (influencer and political activist), Breno Altman (journalist), Paulo Galo (political activist for delivery workers), Rita von Hunty (artist and influencer), Monica Seixas (state deputy from the Socialism and Liberty Party - PSOL)[15]. Al Janiah has also been the venue for the launch of electoral campaigns, such as the state deputy Edilene Maria from PSOL, who is also the coordinator of the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST) in 2022, or more recently the councilman Toninho Vespoli from PSOL, who is running for re-election in 2024. Other important Brazilian politicians, such as councilman Eduardo Suplicy from the Workers' Party (PT), federal deputy Guilherme Boulos (PSOL), and the Brazilian Minister of Agrarian Development, Paulo Teixeira (PT), are among the regulars and have already held political and academic events at Al Janiah.

Some examples of the political mobilization of Al Janiah as an institution, and its workers as individuals with similar social and political experiences in São Paulo reveals the main argument of Saskia Sassen (2014), Çaglar and Glick-Schiller (2011; 2015; 2018), MichelAgier (2011; 2015), and the other authors.

Beyond being a political connector space, Al Janiah is an operator of scales, meaning it is a space for the production of new scales of political action. In May 2017, the Brazilian government was in the process of voting on

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[14] It is not our objective to properly work on this theme, but it is crucial to identify research that connects this rationale, such as Haugbolle and Olsen (2023, p. 129) affirming that "Palestine assume the position of an iconic global leftist cause alongside other anti-imperial, decolonization and national liberation struggles, such as South Africa and Vietnam, and how it happened.".

[15] They even held a meeting for Palestine with these public figures at Al Janiah on November 5, 2023.

the new Migration Law that would replace the Foreigner Statute drawn up during the Brazilian military dictatorship in 1980, with ways to improve the legal status and insertion of migrants of the most diverse categories in Brazil. Among other measures, the law would update the condition of migrants in Brazil in several aspects, such as: Promoting regular entry, humanitarian reception and equal treatment and opportunity for migrants and their families; Guarantee equal and free access for immigrants to services, programs and social benefits; Repudiate practices of collective expulsion or deportation; Eliminate discrimination and guarantee migrants the same human rights guaranteed to Brazilians.

In response, extreme right groups such as the *Direita São Paulo and Juntos peloBrasil* movements organized demonstrations on Avenida Paulista against the new law with signs and shouts: "against the Islamization of Brazil"; also, and we quote "people came here from another country to commit terrorist attacks". Xenophobic, expressions. In addition to the declarations that associate Islamists with criminals, the demonstrators repeatedly chanted collectively, stating that these immigrants were potential terrorists. The same argument also appears on the social networks of the groups responsible for the protests, where other discriminatory arguments can be read. In reaction, Al Janiah employees who were passing through the region at the time of the demonstration clashed with them. Six people, including restaurant employees accused of bodily injury, criminal association, and resistance, were arrested during the disturbance. Brazilian lawyers, activists, and politicians immediately mobilized in defense of the prisoners, claiming that they were victims of xenophobic violence.

By that time, the Counsilor (and current federal deputy) Sâmia Bonfim from the PSOL, as well as lawyers associated with the PT, both left-wing parties, were among those who spoke out. Eventually, the prisoners were released. It should be mentioned that the aforementioned law was approved throughout 2017.[16]

It is important to highlight that, aside from the presence of some individual Arabs and Islamic activists, no Brazilian Arab or Islamic authority or institution publicly expressed a firm opinion on the incidents or acted in defense of the prisoners. This evidence indicates that these migrants' connections are more related to political representation and social mobilization rather than to a cohesive "Brazilian Islamic or Arab community".

In another episode, on 1st September 2019 Al Janiah was attacked with bottles and gas by three unidentified men - in an explicit demonstration of xenophobic violence. From the outrage, a police report was filed at the 5th Police District for property damage and endangerment to the life or health of others.[17] It is noteworthy to point out that the episode occurred during Jair Bolsonaro's presidential term, who is the foremost political representative of the Brazilian far-right. One of his first actions in foreign policy was to notify the United Nations (UN) of Brazil's withdrawal from the Global

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16 For an in-depth understanding of the aforementioned case, we recommend reading the news article produced by El País at the time. Available from: <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/05/04/politica/1493851938_726291.html>Acessed on 26/06/2024.

17 For an in-depth understanding of the aforementioned case, we recommend reading the news article produced by UolNotícias at the time. Available from: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2019/09/01/bar-de-refugiados-palestinos-sofre--ataque-com-garrafas-e-gas-em-sao-paulo.htm>Acessed on 26/06/2024.

Compact for Migration, an agreement the country had joined in December 2018. Through the social media platform Twitter, Jair Bolsonaro commented that "Not just anyone enters our house, nor will just anyone enter Brazil via a pact adopted by others", further warning that "those who may come here must be subject to our laws, rules, and customs, as well as sing our anthem and respect our culture."[18] It can be inferred that the president's ideological stances and actions at the time inflamed the possibility of intolerance-driven violence, as seen in this case. The case mobilized a public audience at the Legislative Assembly of the State of São Paulo (Alesp), and it was treated by authorities as a crime of intolerance and xenophobia, but no one was legally prosecuted or arrested[19]. This case exemplifies how Al Janiah, as a symbol of political resistance and cultural diversity, became a prime target of xenophobia and intolerance in the city of São Paulo.

Conclusion

To conclude, we understand that by the case study of Al Janiah and its workers, we can affirm that its community is built firstly by the similar experience over their vulnerable trajectories from their home countries to the global city of São Paulo. This means that these migrants are actively shaping a city with new political actors, connecting spatialities, and creating new scales of political contention in a globalized world. The so-called Global South manifests actively in an endeavor like this, where politically motivated connections circulate rapidly, with a restaurant/cultural center acting as a connector, diversifying scales of various resistances, particularly focusing on the Palestinian cause. Secondly, and most importantly, their identity in the city is forged by their political and social action, in which they are seen not as palestinians, cuban, algerian, syrian but as refugees, expelled by their home and that still have to fight for it existence and its basic rights in a foreign territory. We can conclude that Al Janiah is both a product created through these trajectory connections that brought its founders together and serves as a space to face the various forms of precariousness in life in a global metropolis. To bring Al Janiah and its workers into perspective is not about celebrating a cosmopolitan and multicultural city; rather, it is to highlight how political struggles for housing, transportation, quality of life, and more unfold similarly in different locations around the globe.more than that, it is to highlight how political struggles for housing, transportation, quality of life, etc., unfold similarly in different locations around the globe.

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18 The statement by President Jair Bolsonaro was cited in an article from UOL Notícias, available from: <https://vestibular.uol.com.br/resumo-das-disciplinas/atualidades/migracoes---governo-de-bolsonaro-abandona-pacto-mundial-das-migracoes-da-onu.htm#:~:text=Através%20da%20rede%20social%20Twitter,a%20soberania%20de%20cada%20país.>Accessed on 26/06/2024.

19 The specifics of the public hearing can be read in an article published by the Alesp news center itself. Available from: <https://www.al.sp.gov.br/noticia/?id=402684>Accessed on 26/06/2024.

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Social Trust and Intercommunal Relations in Pre-Crisis Syria: Reflections from Syrian Refugees in Brazil

Confiança Social e Relações Intercomunitárias na Síria Pré-Crise: Reflexões de Refugiados Sírios no Brasil

Confianza Social y Relaciones Intercomunitarias en la Siria Precrisis: Reflexiones de Refugiados Sirios en Brasil

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ABSTRACT

This article examines social trust among religious communities in Syria and its role in escalating tensions before the 2011 conflict. Understanding intercommunal trust is crucial to analyzing the dynamics that led to violence between the regime and opposition. Based on a 2019 study with Syrian refugees in Brazil, it presents findings from a questionnaire exploring perceptions of social trust in Syria since the 1990s. The study did not explicitly address the 2011 conflict or refugee status but focused on intercommunal relations before 2010. The article details the methodology, analyzes responses, and discusses findings within the broader empirical literature on Syria's pre-crisis sociopolitical landscape.
Keywords: *Trust, Syria, Deeply Divided Societies*

RESUMO

Este artigo examina a confiança social entre comunidades religiosas na Síria e seu papel na escalada das tensões antes do conflito de 2011. Compreender a confiança intercomunitária é essencial para analisar as dinâmicas que levaram à violência entre o regime e a oposição. Com base em um estudo realizado em 2019 com refugiados sírios no Brasil, o artigo apresenta os resultados de um questionário que explora percepções sobre a confiança social na Síria desde os anos 1990. O estudo não abordou explicitamente o conflito de 2011 ou o status de refugiado, mas focou nas relações intercomunitárias antes de 2010. O artigo detalha a metodologia, analisa as respostas e discute os achados no contexto mais amplo da literatura empírica sobre o cenário sociopolítico da Síria antes da crise.
Palavras-chave: *Confiança, Síria, Sociedades Profundamente Divididas*

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RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la confianza social entre las comunidades religiosas en Siria y su papel en la escalada de tensiones antes del conflicto de 2011. Comprender la confianza intercomunitaria es fundamental para analizar las dinámicas que llevaron a la violencia entre el régimen y la oposición. Basado en un estudio realizado en 2019 con refugiados sirios en Brasil, el artículo presenta los resultados de un cuestionario que explora las percepciones sobre la confianza social en Siria desde la década de 1990. El estudio no abordó explícitamente el conflicto de 2011 ni el estatus de refugiado, sino que se centró en las relaciones intercomunitarias antes de 2010. El artículo detalla la metodología, analiza las respuestas y discute los hallazgos en el contexto más amplio de la literatura empírica sobre el panorama sociopolítico de Siria antes de la crisis.

Palabras clave: *Confianza, Siria, Sociedades Profundamente Divididas*

1. Introduction

When protests erupted in Syria in 2011, a heightened sense of insecurity among religious communities played a pivotal role in intensifying tensions and triggering violence between the regime and opposition forces (Goldsmith, 2015). This insecurity exacerbated preexisting identity cleavages within Syria's diverse and multi-sectarian society, transforming the country into a profoundly fragmented state from 2011 onward (Kerr, 2015; Cox, Sisk, Hester, 2017).

Historically, episodes of violent confrontation between the Syrian regime and opposition groups are not unprecedented. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Syria endured a brutal insurgency led by Islamist groups against the Ba'athist regime under Hafez al-Assad. This conflict, marked by significant violence and sectarian undertones, threatened to push the country into a broader sectarian crisis. The culmination of these events occurred with the regime's devastating suppression of the rebellion in Hama in 1982, which effectively quelled the insurgency. In the aftermath, Syria experienced more than two decades of relative political stability, characterized by the absence of large-scale clashes between the regime and opposition or widespread sectarian unrest.

However, this period of apparent stability raises critical questions about the nature and resilience of Syria's social cohesion in the decades preceding the 2011 crisis. To what extent did the conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s—and their aftermath—intensify existing societal divisions? Alternatively, did Syria achieve a degree of reconciliation and normalization in intercommunal relations during this time? What was the state of mutual trust among religious and sectarian communities leading up to 2011? Did the bonds between these groups progressively erode, or were there meaningful efforts to restore intercommunal trust? These questions remain essential for understanding the dynamics that shaped Syria's fragmentation in the early 21st century.

The analysis focuses on a critical dimension of Syria's social cohesion in the decades following the 1982 Hama massacre: social and political trust. By examining the dynamics of trust in deeply divided societies, the study assesses Syria's vulnerability to escalating sectarian conflicts. The outbreak of the 2011 Syrian crisis revealed deep fractures in a society marked by significant cultural and religious diversity, where the erosion of social trust between religious communities emerged as a decisive factor in intensifying political and social tensions.

These fractures raise fundamental questions about the state of intercommunal relations in the years preceding the crisis, particularly regarding the role of trust in shaping perceptions of security and social cohesion.

To explore these questions, the study draws on the perspectives of Syrian refugees in Brazil, whose lived experiences and recollections provide valuable insights into the conditions that preceded Syria's social fragmentation. A particular focus is placed on refugees' expectations and perceptions regarding members of other confessional groups as a key aspect of intercommunal trust.

The research is based on data collected in 2019 through a structured questionnaire distributed among Syrian refugees residing in Brazil. The survey specifically explored participants' perceptions of social trust among religious communities in Syria during the years leading up to 2010. Importantly, the questionnaire did not directly address the 2011 conflict or the participants' refugee status. Instead, it aimed to capture their reflections on the pre-crisis period, enabling an analysis of how intercommunal trust—or its erosion—contributed to perceptions of insecurity and social fragmentation.

To provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play, the investigation analyzes three aspects: (1) levels of social trust between confessional groups (e.g., Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Alawite Muslims); (2) the quality of intercommunal interactions, examining patterns of relations between Christians and Muslims, as well as tensions among Muslim subgroups; and (3) trust in specific political actors, whose actions and rhetoric often shaped perceptions of stability or insecurity. As emphasized by Hewstone et al. (2008), trust

is a multifaceted phenomenon with direct implications for social cohesion, influencing not only the stability of intercommunal relations but also the broader resilience of the social fabric. By incorporating these aspects, the study adopts a comprehensive approach that uncovers the factors contributing to vulnerabilities within the social fabric and the underlying dynamics preceding the Syrian conflict.

At the core of this analysis lies the degree of societal vulnerability to fragmentation and sectarianism during the 2011 crisis. This is assessed through the effects of trust—or its absence—on social cohesion. To refine the findings, the study incorporates additional contextual factors, such as the impact of the authoritarian regime on social relations, regional differences between urban and rural areas, and the demographic profiles of the refugees interviewed in Brazil.

To provide a deeper understanding of the collected data, the results of the questionnaire were analyzed in conjunction with existing literature in history and anthropology. The analysis emphasizes critical topics such as the historical memory of intercommunal conflicts, which shaped perceptions of threats and alliances, and the Ba'ath regime's policies for managing Syria's cultural diversity, particularly its strategies of exclusion and political control. By situating the research within this broader historical and theoretical framework, the study offers a comprehensive exploration of the conditions that preceded Syria's social fragmentation and the escalation of the 2011 crisis.

By exploring these questions, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersections between social trust, cultural diversity, and vulnerability to conflict. It offers a perspective that combines historical and so-

ciological analyses with empirical data gathered from Syrian refugees. This approach aims to shed light on the social mechanisms that drive fragmentation dynamics in contexts of crisis and diversity, with implications not only for the Syrian case but also for other societies marked by deep divisions.

2. Social and Political Trust

Since 2011, Syria has become a profoundly divided society, marked by escalating tensions and deepening identity cleavages (Kerr, 2015; Cox, Sisk, Hester, 2017). As Leon Goldsmith (2015, 2018) highlights, the sense of insecurity among religious communities played a central role in sparking violence between the regime and the opposition during the early stages of the Syrian conflict. This case underscores the importance of social and political trust in understanding the mechanisms that transform latent societal tensions into open conflict, both triggering and perpetuating violence.

Timothy Wilson (2011, p. 280) sheds further light on this dynamic by examining how seemingly ordinary tensions in deeply divided societies can quickly escalate into broader conflicts. According to Wilson, these divisions often persist in a "latent state", only to resurface during periods of crisis, when they emerge as organizing principles for collective action. This observation is particularly relevant to the Syrian case, where decades of underlying tensions, though suppressed, remained unresolved. The apparent stability preceding 2011, therefore, may not have reflected genuine social cohesion but rather the temporary containment of deeper societal fractures.

In such deeply divided societies, ethnic affiliations tend to transcend their original spheres, infiltrating organizations, activities, and social roles that might otherwise appear unrelated to ethnic concerns. As Horowitz (1985, p. 7-8) argues, this pervasiveness causes ethnic conflicts to spread across multiple sectors of social life, amplifying their severity and increasing the impact of political disputes. This phenomenon is particularly significant in the Syrian context, where sectarian divisions were not merely confined to religious identities but also influenced access to political, economic, and social resources. As divisions become embedded in broader aspects of societal functioning, they exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, intensifying societal fragmentation.

This fragmentation highlights the critical role of trust—or its absence—in shaping the dynamics of conflict. In societies where ethnic and sectarian divisions permeate various sectors of life, the erosion of trust between individuals and institutions becomes both a symptom and a driver of societal breakdown. Among the various critical factors influencing conflict dynamics, the level of trust—or its absence—between individuals and between them and the state often emerges as a pivotal element in the escalation of internal conflicts. Trust functions as the societal 'glue' that binds individuals together, and when it is lacking, society becomes more susceptible to conflict (Gambetta, 1988; Langer et al., 2017). However, the relationship between trust and violence operates bidirectionally: distrust between groups can escalate conflict, and conversely, conflict situations tend to deepen distrust among individuals (SPENCE, 1999).

Understanding trust in this context requires examining its multidimensional na-

ture, as it involves not only rational assessments but also emotional and perceptual elements. In this sense, "trust" designates an expectation that is usually related to a set of emotions and perceptions, which can profoundly influence behavior (Bauer, Freitag, 2018, p.15). Several theoretical approaches exist regarding how trust is established, ranging from those that emphasize trust as a calculated and strategic behavior to more subjectivist perspectives that highlight the role of beliefs and values (Kramer, 2018, p.96). This study recognizes that trust is not purely rational; it also contains a strong emotional dimension. Fear and anxiety, for instance, can transform seemingly neutral or mundane situations into perceived threats, amplifying distrust and shaping behaviors in conflict-prone societies (Bar-tal, Alon, 2016).

Social trust is partly socially constructed over the medium term, influenced by beliefs and worldviews (Bar-tal, Alon, 2016). However, it's essential also to consider individuals' diverse personal experiences shaping their perceptions of other groups and political institutions. This perspective suggests that perception isn't solely shaped by socialization but by the interaction between personal experiences and social contexts but from the interplay between personal experiences and social interactions. Therefore, evaluating trust levels between individuals and political institutions should consider various factors affecting this dynamic (Cox et al., 2017, p.16). This research aims to assess the trust levels of Syrian refugees concerning issues involving inter-religious community relations. To achieve this, the research employed the concept of social trust, which refers to in-

dividuals' expectations towards others with whom they interact daily[3].

The literature often distinguishes between particularized trust, which concerns relationships between close individuals, usually face-to-face, and generalized trust, which refers to expectations about unknown people (Lenard, Miller, 2017, p.57). Generalized trust extends beyond the immediate circle of a person's social relationships and serves as the basis for social interactions between strangers. As some authors argue, it is generalized trust that sustains cooperation between individuals in a society (Lenard, Miller, 2018, p.57).

This research examines social trust from an intermediate perspective situated between particularized and generalized trust. It explores how social cleavages influence individuals' expectations regarding other groups. In situations of social uncertainty, people actively seek signals and information about others' intentions and likely behaviors. One way to obtain such information is to infer intentions and motivations from the social groups to which the unknown person belongs. This process of social categorization tends to affect the perception and judgment people make of others (Kramer, 2018; Tajfel, 1974). Given this tendency, the questionnaire aimed to capture this social dimension of trust among Syrian refugees towards other groups in Syria in the years prior to 2011.

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3 The literature often distinguishes between particularized trust, which concerns relationships between close individuals, usually face-to-face, and generalized trust, which refers to expectations about unknown people (Lenard, Miller, 2017, p.57). Generalized trust extends beyond the immediate circle of a person's social relationships and serves as the basis for social interactions between strangers. As some authors argue, it is generalized trust that sustains cooperation between individuals in a society (Lenard, Miller, 2018, p.57).

In addition to social trust, this research also examined political trust, understood as the expectations individuals place in political leaders and institutions. Specifically, political and institutional trust refers to the belief that these actors and entities will act appropriately and in accordance with expected norms (Lenard; Miller, 2018, p. 63).The aim in exploring political trust was not to conduct a comprehensive survey of people's perceptions regarding all political institutions, but rather to focus on specific actors in order to identify potential shifts in response patterns. By doing so, the research not only values the individual responses obtained but also prioritizes a comparative analysis of participants' response patterns across different themes. This approach allows for a more refined assessment of variations and trends in the respondents' perceptions.

3. Methodology

This study employed a questionnaire designed specifically for Syrian refugees in Brazil to capture their perceptions of Syria during the years preceding 2011. The research is part of a broader investigation conducted by the author (Zahreddine; Pires, 2022) that assesses Syria's social cohesion through three interrelated aspects: identity, horizontal inequalities, and social and political trust. The present study focuses exclusively on trust, both interpersonal and political, while findings related to identity and inequalities are discussed in separate publications. These analytical aspects are methodologically interconnected and provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping social cohesion in pre-2011 Syria (Langer et al., 2017; Stewart, 2008).

The questionnaire was grounded in Social Identity Theory and studies on Horizontal Ine-

qualities, which emphasize the role of group identities and disparities in shaping trust and societal relations (Horowitz, 1985; Cuhadar; Dayton, 2011). Existing models, such as those by Harb (2017) and *The Day After* survey (2016), were adapted to the Syrian context, with particular emphasis on questions exploring trust in other groups and political actors. The survey employed closed-ended questions with structured rating scales to ensure clarity, consistency, and comparability across responses. Given the demographic profile of Syrian refugees in Brazil—most of whom arrived after 2011 as young male adults[4]—the study prioritized questions focusing on the 2000s. This approach aimed to enhance the relevance and accuracy of responses by concentrating on a more recent timeframe. To further anchor participants' memories, key temporal markers were included: 2005, marked by liberal economic reforms and a severe drought, and 2007, which saw the re-election of Bashar al-Assad, both pivotal moments influencing perceptions of institutional trust and living conditions.

To ensure accessibility and precision, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic with the assistance of a specialized professor and subsequently tested with Syrian volunteers. This process refined terminology, clarified ambiguities, and ensured alignment with the study's objectives. Participants' high levels of education—reflecting Syria's historical emphasis on basic and higher education (Rodrigues; Sala; Siqueira, 2017)—were also taken into account, ensuring that the language and structure of the questions facilitated nuanced and detailed responses. The historical context of the early 21st

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4 With an average age of 26 at the time of arrival, comprising 57% men and 43% women (Calegari; Justino, 2016).

century played a central role in shaping the questionnaire, connecting participants' individual perceptions to significant events and social structures. The research incorporated the lived experiences of Syria's ethnic, religious, and social groups, offering insights into nearly two decades of social dynamics and vulnerabilities.

A total of 20 Syrians participated in the study, located in São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, and Curitiba, and aged between 25 and 35 years. The group was predominantly male, with 16 men and 4 women, and exhibited a high level of education: 17 participants had completed higher education, 2 had completed high school, and 1 had completed elementary school. The respondents reflected diverse geographic origins within Syria, including Aleppo (4), Damascus (4), Homs (5), Hama (2), Latakia (2), Tartus (1), As-Suwaida (1), and Rif Dimashq (1). Regarding religious affiliation, 19 participants provided information: 3 identified as Catholic Christians, 8 as Orthodox Christians, 6 as Sunni Muslims, 1 as Ismaili, and 1 as belonging to another religious group. While Christians predominated in the sample, alongside a significant presence of Sunni Muslims, this distribution does not reflect Syria's demographic reality, where Christians represent approximately 10% of the population. However, it aligns with historical patterns of Syrian migration to Brazil, which began in the late 19th century, predominantly involving Christians, followed later by Muslims and Jews (Baeza; Pinto, 2016).

The most recent wave of Syrian immigration, starting in 2012 due to the escalating conflict, initially comprised predominantly Christians from Homs, a city historically connected to the Syrian diaspora in Brazil. As the war intensified, the refugee profile evolved, with an increasing number of Sunni Muslims arriving, particularly in São Paulo (Baeza, 2018). Regional differences in refugee settlement patterns are notable: studies show that 95% of refugees in São Paulo are Muslims (Calegari; Justino, 2016), while Christians are more prevalent in Belo Horizonte (BBC, 2015). To capture this diversity, the research was conducted in São Paulo, Curitiba, and Belo Horizonte. These cities were chosen due to their established Syrian communities and diverse refugee profiles. However, time and budget constraints prevented the inclusion of other major cities, such as Rio de Janeiro, which also host significant refugee populations. Despite these limitations, the study remains exploratory and establishes a foundation for future research to address these gaps (Rodrigues; Sala; Siqueira, 2018).

It is worth noting that the questionnaire was extensive, requiring considerable time and commitment from participants to address its questions. Although the survey did not focus directly on the 2011 conflict, the sensitive nature of the topics explored required careful consideration. To prioritize participants' well-being, respondents were allowed to skip questions they found uncomfortable, which did not compromise the integrity of the study given its qualitative and exploratory nature. As a result, the number of responses varied across questions. Notably, questions related to trust, positioned toward the end of the questionnaire, received fewer responses compared to other sections, reflecting both the sensitive nature of trust as a topic and the effort required to complete the survey.

4. The Questions and the Responses Obtained

The questions presented in this study explore social trust, with a special focus on interfaith trust, across various themes. The first question investigated the sense of security felt by individuals belonging to the interviewee's religious groups during the period between 1990 and 2000.

Table 1 - How would you describe the sense of security experienced by members of your religious group in Syria during the 1990s and early 2000s?

Response Options	Count (Total = 16)	Percentage
Verygood	9	56.25%
Good	3	18.75%
Neutral	2	12.50%
Poor	1	6.25%
Verypoor	1	6.25%

Source: Own Elaboration
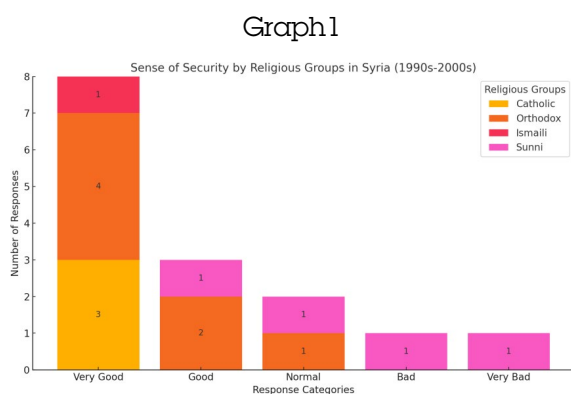
Graph 1

Source: Own Elaboration

The responses show that the interviewees considered Syria a very safe place in the 1990s. This finding corroborates qualitative and ethnographic studies that highlight Syrians' impression that, overall, Syria was a very safe country (Rabo, 2012a). Although Syria experienced a turbulent period in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the subsequent years were marked by an absence of violent clashes and crime. From a confessional perspective, there is a distinct pattern in the responses. Christians expressed a stronger sense of security compared to Sunnis. The responses from Sunni participants indicated a more heterogeneous view, ranging from very poor to good perceptions of security.

The next question addresses the same theme, but from the year 2000 onward. It aimed to determine if the political transition represented a significant period for the sense of security. The early 2000s were marked by a brief political opening, followed by a tightening of the regime. It is important to understand if these events had any impact on the sense of security.

Table2 - Did the sense of security within your religious group change after the year 2000?

Opções de respostas	Contagem (total=15)	Porcentagem
Improved a lot	4	26.67%
Improved	3	20%
Stayedthesame	4	26.67%
Worsened	2	13.33%
Worsened a lot	2	13.33%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 2
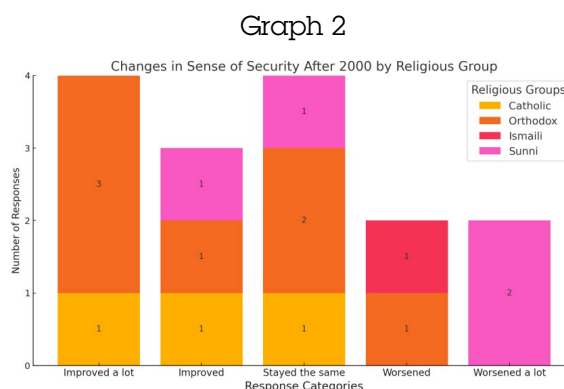
Source: Own Elaboration

Evaluating the responses, it is possible to see that they are well distributed among the options, indicating that the personal experience and impressions of the interviewees vary

greatly. There is a tendency toward options indicating some degree of improvement or maintenance. However, these are not much more significant. When assessing the responses from a religious cleavage perspective, it is observed that despite maintaining the trends of the previous response, there is a slight increase in the significance of options indicating maintenance or worsening of the situation for both groups.

Next, the questionnaire poses a more direct question about the interviewee's perception of how members of other groups viewed their group. Note that in this case, the question is not whether the participant trusts members of other groups, but whether they believe that people from other groups trusted the group to which they belong.

Table3 - Do you believe individuals from other groups trusted members of your religious community?

Response options	Count (total = 16)	Percentage
Yes, always	2	12.50%
Sometimes	13	81.25%
Never	1	6.25%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph3
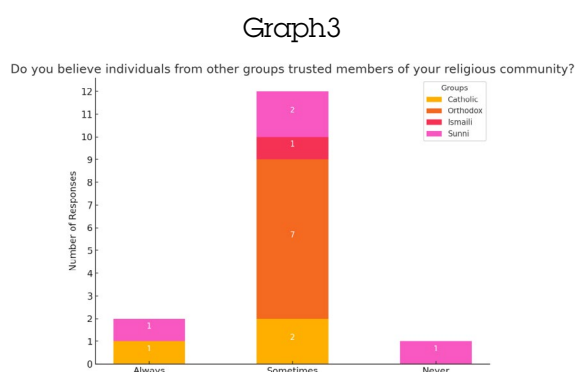
Source: Own Elaboration

The responses to the above question present a positive picture. They indicate that participants perceive that others, on certain occasions, harbor distrust toward their group. As a result, the picture of social trust becomes

slightly less positive when considering the expectations that actors have regarding the expectations of others. It is not about doubting the intentions of others but recognizing that others may lack sufficient information to engage in a more cooperative relationship. From a confessional perspective, volunteers from all confessional groups share the impression of eventual distrust.

The next question asked the participant how they would describe their interaction with people from other religious communities in the city where they lived. Syria is a very diverse country, and each region reflects this diversity in a distinct way.

Table4 - How would you describe your interaction with people from other religious communities in the city where you lived?

Response Options	Count (total=15)	Percentage
Verygood	6	37.50%
Good	9	56.25%
Neutral	1	6.25%
Bad	0	0%
Verybad	0	0%
No interaction	0	0%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 4
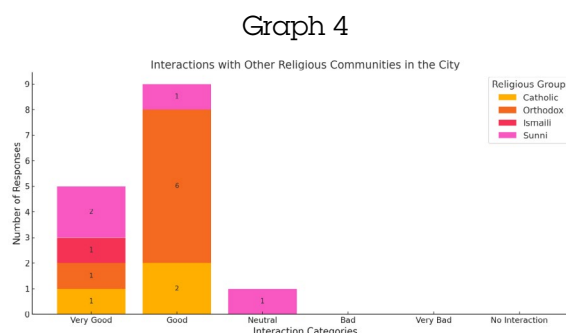
Source: Own Elaboration

The responses to the above question are categorical. They clearly indicate that all interviewees perceived the relationships between

religious communities in the cities where they lived as positive, except for one volunteer who considered them average. This is an important finding regarding how the interviewees assess the quality of relationships between people from different groups. It demonstrates how coexistence among members of distinct groups reached a significantly positive level in Syria. Evaluating the responses from a confessional perspective, it is evident that all groups expressed a very positive view.

The next question asks participants to describe their interactions with certain groups between 2000 and 2005. The most relevant responses will be presented here.

Table 5 -How would you describe your interactions with Christians? (Between 2000 and 2005)

Opções de respostas	Contagem (total=16)	Porcentagem
Muito cauteloso	0	0%
Cauteloso	1	6,25%
Moderada	6	37,50%
Confiante	5	31,25%
Muito confiante	4	25%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 5
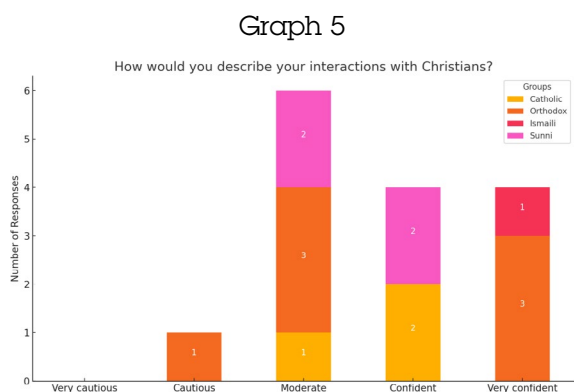
Source: Own Elaboration

When asked about their perception of Christians, it is evident that Christians, in general, are well-regarded by the participants. The quality of interaction with Christians varies from moderate to very good, with the exception of one Orthodox Christian who chose the option indicating a more cautious interaction. These responses align with empirical literature regarding Christians, who have a good reputation in Syrian society (Rabo, 2012b).

Table6 – How would you describe your interactions with Alawites? (Between 2000 and 2005)

Options for answers	Count (total=16)	Percentage
Verycautious	3	18.75%
Cautious	3	18.75%
Moderate	7	43.75%
Confident	3	18.75%
Veryconfident	0	0%

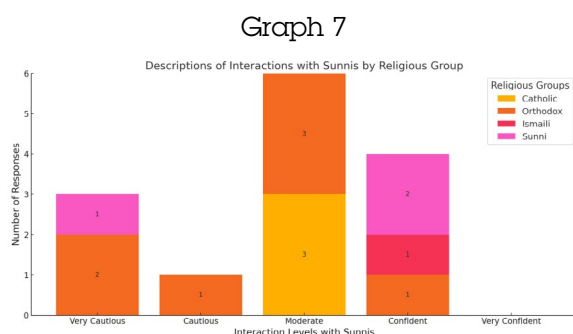Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 6
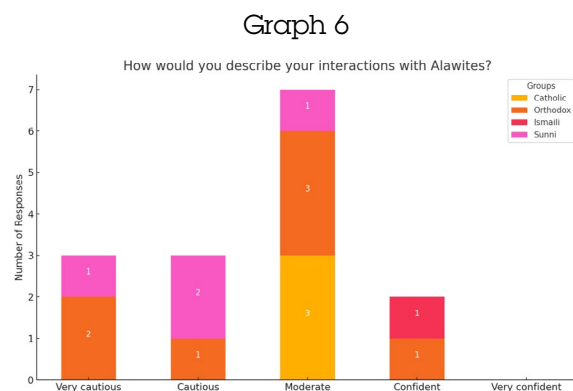
Source: Own Elaboration

On the other hand, the quality of interactions with Alawites, according to the participants, is less positive compared to their interactions with Christians. It is important to note that the questionnaire did not include the opinions of Alawites themselves. Most Christian volunteers expressed a moderate level of interaction with Alawites, but some also expressed a higher degree of caution. However, one Christian respondent indicated trust. The responses from Sunnis, on the other hand, demonstrate a higher degree of caution compared to Christians.

Table7 - How would you describe your interactions with Sunnis? (Between 2000 and 2005)

Options for responses	Count (total=16)	Percentage
Verycautious	3	18.75%
Cautious	1	6.25%
Moderate	6	37.50%
Confident	5	31.25%
Veryconfident	1	6.25%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 7

Source: Own Elaboration

Regarding Sunnis, the responses obtained indicate a prevalence of a moderate stance. However, there is also significance in options that demonstrate some degree of caution. It is important to note that, although Sunnis generally expressed more confidence in interactions with fellow Sunnis compared to what was expressed by Christians, there was also a Sunni who exhibited extreme caution. This information is important as it indicates that there is no automatic relationship between belonging to a particular group and the quality of relationships with other members. Social reality is always complex, and many factors influence the quality of interactions an individual has with others. It is crucial to be attentive to these nuances in order not to reproduce stereotypes or overly simplistic conclusions.

The next question asked participants if they felt insecure or anxious when interacting with people from other communities. This

question is important because a lack of trust can be a barrier to people interacting with members of other groups, thus creating a positive experience (Gambetta, 1988).

Table8 - Did you feel insecure or anxious when interacting with people from other communities?

Answer Options	Count (total=16)	Percentage
Always	1	6.26%
Sometimes	8	50%
Never	7	43.75%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 8
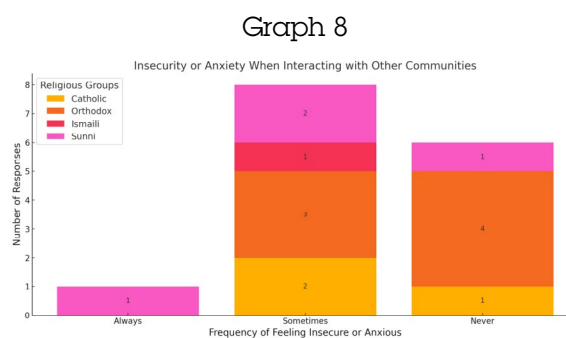
Source: Own Elaboration

The responses indicate that there was no widespread sense of insecurity or anxiety among the participants in their interactions with others. Only one participant indicated a constant state of insecurity and anxiety. However, it is important to evaluate under what circumstances the feeling of insecurity or anxiety was more pronounced for those who occasionally felt insecure. It is crucial to gain a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms that stimulate feelings of insecurity or anxiety in social interactions, as these mechanisms can be key to understanding broader phenomena. But overall, the picture presented by the responses was positive.

The next question aimed to assess the participant's perception of the intentions of individuals from other groups. It asked the vo-

lunteer whether they believed that people from other groups were trying to diminish the status of their own group. It is important to note that this question tangentially addresses the dimension of inequalities by introducing the aspect of group status.

Table9 - Do you believe that people from other groups tried to diminish the status of your group?

Options for answers	Count (total=16)	Percentage
Always	1	6.25%
Sometimes	11	68.75%
Never	4	25%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 9
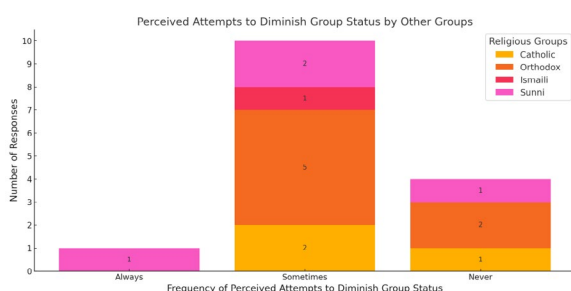
Source: Own Elaboration

The responses indicate a positive attitude, but they still demonstrate a cautious stance from the participants. Most of them believe that members of other groups occasionally try to diminish the status of the group they belong to. Looking at it from a confessional category perspective, there is not a significant difference in the responses between the groups, except for one Sunni volunteer who indicated that individuals from other groups always sought to diminish the status of Sunnis.

The next question asked the participant if they felt safe openly expressing their religious and cultural identity in public spaces. It encompasses a broader dynamic than face-to-face interactions.

Table10 - Did you feel safe expressing your religious and cultural identity openly in public spaces?

Options of answers	Count (total=16)	Percentage
Always	10	62.50%
Sometimes	4	25%
Never	2	12%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 10
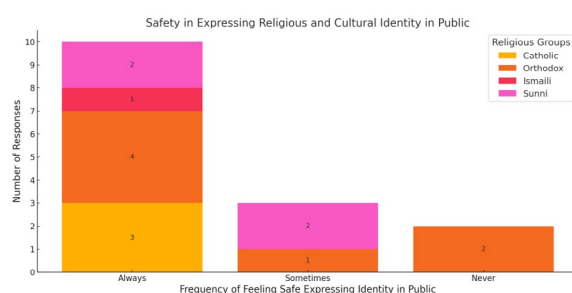
Source: Own Elaboration

The responses indicate that, overall, the sense of security regarding the expression of religious identity is high among the participants. The majority indicated that they always felt comfortable expressing their religious identity. The option indicating they felt safe in certain cases was also significant. The option indicating they never felt safe came last.

It is important to note that those who considered themselves never safe to openly manifest their religious identity are Christians. Understanding that the Christian community is a minority in Syria, and Syria is predominantly a Muslim country, this response may indicate a certain anxiety linked to this condition. On the other hand, two Sunnis indicated that in some situations, they did not feel comfortable openly expressing their religious identity. This might reflect what the literature suggests, that part of the Sunni community felt that the Syrian regime sought to control Islamic religious symbols in public spaces.

The next question asked volunteers if they felt safe in neighborhoods where another religious community is in the majority. Just as cities and regions are diverse in terms of cultural demographics, neighborhoods are equally diverse. Therefore, it is crucial to spatially situate these relationships.

Table11 - Did you feel safe in neighborhoods where the majority was composed of people from another religious community?

Response Options	Count (total=15)	Percentage
At all times	6	40%
Sometimes	7	46.67%
Never	2	13.33%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 11
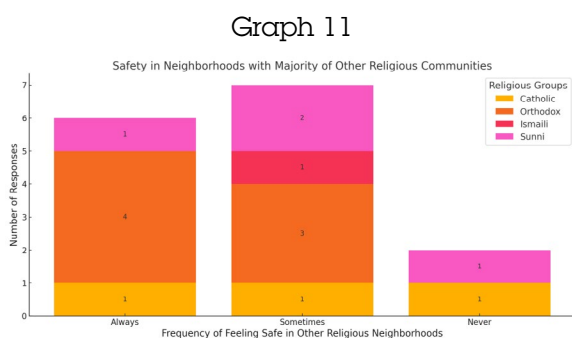
Source: Own Elaboration

The responses indicate a moderate and positive degree of security in neighborhoods where another religious community is in the majority. However, some nuances are observed. It is important to understand the circumstances and spaces that favor or hinder trust among members of different groups. The responses point to a positive outlook, but they also indicate that there were circumstances in which participants did not feel as secure. Looking through the confessional lens, it is observed that no group showed a consistent trend in responses.

The final questions ask the volunteer to position themselves regarding statements about the importance of personal and cultural ties in times of need. These questions assess the importance of social bonds and networks of solidarity in everyday situations, especially in times of need. Since trust involves positive expectations about others' behavior in situations of vulnerability, understanding how people deal with certain daily situations can provide important insights into the level of social trust in Syria.

Table12 - Do you agree with the statement: "Members of your religious community can always rely on one another"?

Options for responses	Count (total=15)	Percentage
Yes	5	33.33%
No	4	26.67%
Prefernottoanswer	6	40%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 12
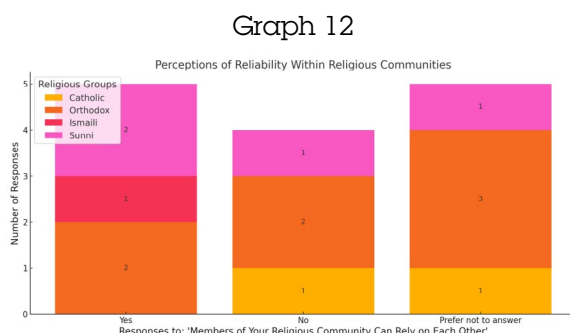
Source: Own Elaboration

The above responses indicate a perception of some fragmentation within their respective communities. The Sunnis showed a slightly more positive perception regarding the possibility of mutual support among internal members, but it is not significant.

Table13 - In times of personal need, could you trust individuals from other religious communities?

Options of responses	Count (total=15)	Percentage
Yes	3	20%
No	3	20%
Prefernottoanswer	9	60%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 13
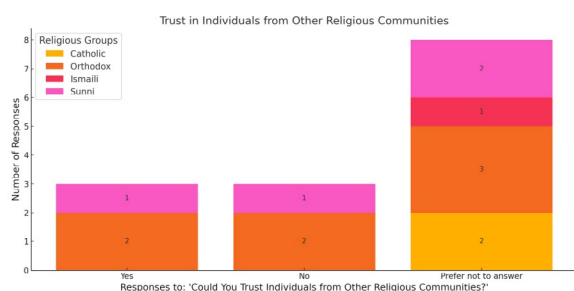
Source: Own Elaboration

The above scenario presents a less positive character than the previous question. Only 3 agreed with the statement, demonstrating that, in certain occasions, trust between people from different groups may not be as positive. However, it is not a definitive conclusion. It is important to note that the majority preferred not to take a stance on this, indicating sensitivity towards the topic.

To assess the degree of political trust, the next question asked participants to indicate their level of trust in specific political actors. The first and perhaps most significant actor considered was the president. As discussed in the historical chapter, the president occupies a central role in Syrian politics under the Ba'ath regime. The political system in Syria is heavily centered around the presidency, to the extent that a cult of personality has developed around the president (Wedeen, 1999). Furthermore, beyond sectarian ties, the regime is sustained by personal networks of trust, particularly within the president's extended family.

Table14 -How much trust do you have in the President?

Response Options	Count (total=15)	Percentage
No Trust	4	26,67%
Low Trust	1	6,67%
Moderate Trust	4	26,67%
Full Trust	3	20%
Total	3	20%

Source: Own Elaboration

The table above shows a distribution of responses across the options, with no single choice dominating significantly. This suggests that there was not a complete lack of trust in the figure of the president. The period in question primarily covers the early years of Bashar al-Assad's presidency, marked by a brief phase of political openness, which was soon followed by a tightening of the regime's control.

Graph14
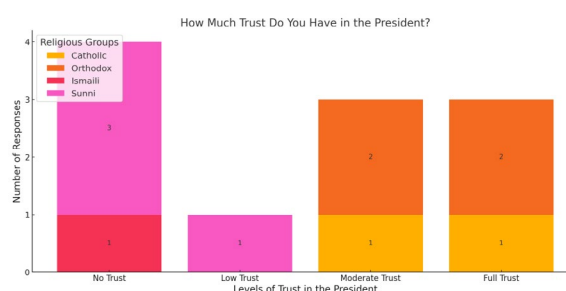
Source: Own Elaboration

When evaluating the responses through the lens of confessional cleavages, a completely different picture emerges. The answers reveal a clear tendency among participants to assess social reality differently based on their confessional affiliation. Sunnis exhibit a predominantly negative stance toward the president, while Christians display views ranging from moderate to highly positive. These responses underscore the significance of this issue in understanding the primary divisions within Syrian society.

Next, the questionnaire asks participants to evaluate the People's Council of Syria, the legislative authority. Of its 250 members, the National Progressive Front, led by the Ba'ath Party, holds the majority. However, there is limited space for opposition, which does not, of course, indicate that the regime is open or democratic.

Table 15 - How much trust do you have in the Assembly of Syria?

Response Options	Count (total=14)	Percentage
No Trust	4	28,57%
Low Trust	3	21,43%
Moderate Trust	7	50%
Full Trust	0	0%
Total	0	0%

Source: Own Elaboration

Participants expressed views ranging from neutral to highly negative regarding the People's Council of Syria, with a notable prevalence of responses indicating a moderate level of trust. The literature highlights that the Council is not a key political actor in major decision-making processes, as these are subordinated to the executive branch. The responses may reflect this subordinate role of the Council.
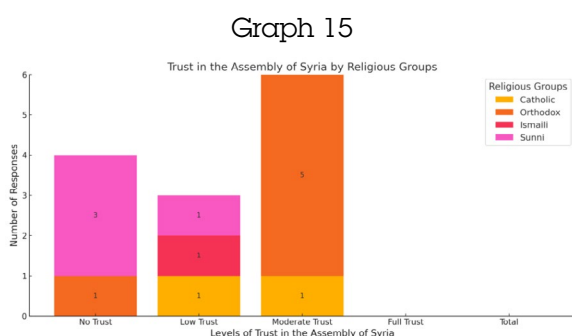
Graph 15

Source: Own Elaboration

When evaluating the responses through the lens of confessional cleavages, distinct response patterns can be observed between Christians and Muslims, though not to the same degree as the polarization seen in assessments of the president. There is no clear polarization of opinions regarding the People's Council; the majority of Christians expressed moderate trust, although some reported little to no confidence. Muslims, particularly Sunnis, demonstrated an explicitly negative perception.

The next actor evaluated is the Ba'ath Party. Some scholars argue that, over the decades, the party has lost its significance in decision-making to the military establishment. In this sense, the core of the regime rests on the armed forces and intelligence services. Nevertheless, the Ba'ath Party remains the ideological cornerstone of the government.

Table 16 - How much trust do you have in the Ba'ath Party?

Response Options	Count (total=13)	Percentage
No Trust	5	38,46%
Low Trust	3	23,08%
Moderate Trust	4	30,77%
Full Trust	0	0%
Total	1	7,69%

Source: Own Elaboration

The responses indicate low levels of trust in the Ba'ath Party, with the exception of a small minority that expressed full confidence. This suggests that the level of trust in the party does not align with the trust placed in the figure of the president. This is an important finding, as it reveals that political actors who have historically been closely associated—such as the president and the Ba'ath Party—are not perceived by the population in the same way.
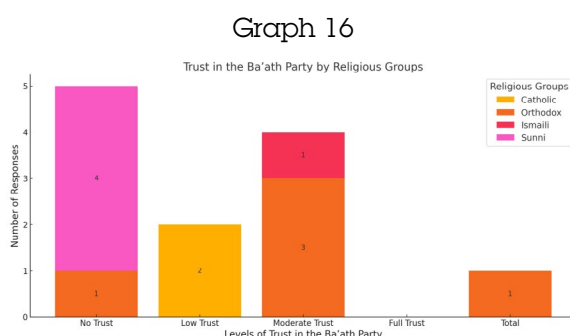
Graph 16

Source: Own Elaboration

Evaluating the responses through the lens of religious cleavages reveals an important pat-

tern. Once again, Sunni participants expressed an explicitly negative stance (though it is worth noting that the Ismaili participant displayed a moderate position). Christians, on the other hand, presented responses ranging from moderate to negative, with one isolated case showing full trust. This pattern highlights a disconnect between the figure of the president and the Ba'ath Party. This is a critical insight for understanding how Syrians attribute responsibility for the regime's failures and abuses.

The findings suggest that, for some segments of the population, the president is not perceived as responsible for the crises the country experienced in the 2000s, nor for the regime's abuses and cases of corruption. While further research is necessary to explore this possibility, the current findings indicate that the Ba'ath Party is viewed more negatively, whereas the president is seen in a comparatively more positive light by part of the population.

Table 17 - How much trust do you have in theopposition parties?

Response Options	Count (total=12)	Percentage
No Trust	5	41,67%
Low Trust	4	33,33%
Moderate Trust	2	16,67%
Full Trust	0	0%
Total	1	8,33%

Source: Own Elaboration

The opposition parties are generally viewed negatively by participants, with one isolated case expressing an extremely positive perception. It is important to contrast this finding with the responses regarding the Ba'ath Party and the People's Council of Syria. In this context, it raises the question of how representative these opposition parties are perceived to be by the general population. The responses obtained

here are particularly significant, as the period under analysis corresponds to the brief phase of political openness in Syria.

Graph 17

Trust in the Opposition Parties by Religious Groups
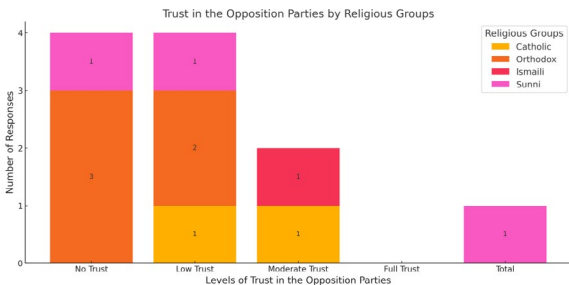
Source: Own Elaboration

Analyzing the responses through the lens of religious cleavages, it becomes clear that there is no radical polarization between the groups. Most Christian participants expressed a distinctly negative stance, although one individual demonstrated a more moderate view. Similarly, Sunni participants generally conveyed a negative perception, but there was one notable case of full trust in the opposition parties.

Table 18 - How much trust do you have in thearmy

Response Options	Count (total=15)	Percentage
No Trust	4	26,67%
Low Trust	2	13,33%
Moderate Trust	2	13,33%
Full Trust	4	26,67%
Total	3	20%

Source: Own Elaboration

The responses reveal a significant distribution of participants' opinions across all options. Therefore, there is no clear consensus among the volunteers.

Table 18
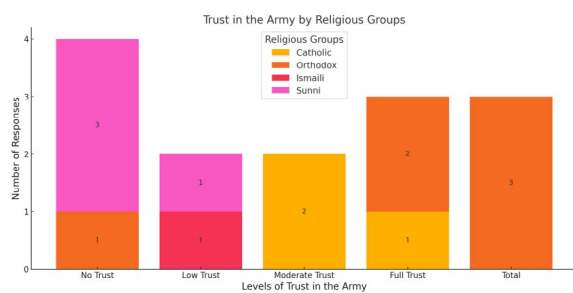
Source: Own Elaboration

The religious cleavage reveals a trend toward polarization in the responses. While this polarization is not as pronounced as it was regarding the figure of the president, it remains significant. Among Muslims, there is a consensus on a negative perception of the armed forces. In contrast, Christians exhibit responses ranging from moderate to full trust, with one exception indicating no trust at all. Although not unanimous among participants, this suggests a distinct response pattern for each group.

5. Discussion

The responses presented above, in line with the literature, suggest that Syria in the years preceding the 2011 conflict was not an explicitly or uniformly divided society, where sectarian antagonisms dominated all aspects of social relations. Distrust and hostility were not pervasive in everyday interactions, and there was a general environment of mutual respect among people from different confessional groups, particularly between Christians and Muslims (Rabo, 2012). However, tensions did exist—albeit often latent—surfacing in specific contexts or circumstances. These tensions were neither universal nor constant; rather, certain topics and relationships revealed more polarization, with some intergroup dynamics

proving more strained than others. As Annika Rabo (2012, p. 131) highlights, the perception of "good neighborliness" prevailed in public spaces, especially in major cities. In fact, friendships across religious boundaries were not uncommon, and mutual trust was frequently observed in day-to-day life. This nuanced dynamic is reflected in the questionnaire responses, where the majority of Christians reported feeling secure expressing their religiosity in public, at least on certain occasions. Yet, a cautious stance was still evident among a minority of Christians, underscoring that while trust characterized many relationships, it was not universally experienced.

Given this backdrop, an essential question emerges: how did sectarian tensions escalate so rapidly during the 2011 crisis? Both the questionnaire responses and the empirical literature suggest a series of interconnected factors that rendered Syrian society vulnerable during this period, despite the generally positive perceptions of social trust. First, the quality of intergroup relationships varied significantly across communities. Evidence suggests that relationships between Christians and Muslims were generally positive. Christians were respected and admired by Muslims, often viewed as trustworthy—though sometimes through a paternalistic lens. However, relationships within the Muslim community, particularly between Sunnis and Alawites, were more strained (Salamandra, 2013). These uneven dynamic underscores the complexity of intergroup relations in Syria, which did not follow a uniform pattern and were further influenced by regional differences and overlapping social and political divisions.

The political context further complicated these relationships. Annika Rabo (2012a;

2012b) argues that Syrians displayed a marked caution when discussing cultural diversity, a sensitivity rooted in the Ba'ath regime's state-building process. The regime emphasized constitutional equality among citizens while minimizing religious and ethnic differences, portraying them as either irrelevant or potentially threatening to national unity. This approach was shared by other secular ideologies, which feared that highlighting such divisions could undermine societal cohesion (Rabo, 2012b, p. 80). Consequently, public discussions on sectarian identity often remained muted, though underlying divisions persisted.

Historical memory also played a significant role in shaping intergroup perceptions. The insurgency of the 1970s and the violent crackdown in Hama in 1982 left lasting scars on Syrian society. Although the opposition movements of the 2000s were distinct from the radical insurgencies of the 1970s, the memory of these events continued to influence perceptions. Lefèvre (2015, p. 129) argues that the trauma of the 1980s "planted seeds of distrust" between Alawites and Sunnis, leading many in 2011 to question the sincerity of moderate Islamist factions within the opposition. Similarly, Goldsmith (2015, p. 154) notes that some Alawites interpreted the 2011 uprising as an act of revenge by Islamist groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, for their defeat in 1982. Despite the lack of direct historical continuity between the two movements, these anxieties were effectively exploited by the regime, which positioned itself as the guarantor of order and protector of minority rights against the threat of radical religious groups. As Lefèvre highlights, Alawite distrust of Sunnis has deep historical roots, extending even to groups considered "moderate," such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (Lefèvre, 2015, p. 125).

Yet, as Annika Rabo (2012) demonstrates, the memory of past traumas did not always dominate everyday interactions. These memories gained salience only under specific historical circumstances. The responses suggest that, despite the weight of history, participants did not exhibit excessive levels of distrust toward other religious groups. This observation points to the need for further studies on collective memory in Syria to better understand how historical events shaped intergroup relations in the decades leading up to the conflict.

Regional dynamics add another layer of complexity to the issue of trust. Goldsmith (2015, p. 152) observes that despite migration to major urban centers, Alawites maintained strong ties to their rural regions of origin, preserving solidarity networks that were rooted in village life. These networks played a critical role in times of crisis, enabling Alawites to maintain routes of return to their home regions (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 153). This phenomenon reflects the broader role of insecurity in sustaining communal cohesion in deeply divided societies.

A further factor is the uncertainty surrounding perceptions of "the other." While participants generally expressed a willingness to trust individuals from other groups, many were unsure whether this trust was reciprocal or whether others trusted members of their own group. These dynamic underscores the interactive nature of trust, where expectations about others' intentions and behaviors are shaped by limited information and social categorization (Jervis, 1970). During the uncertainty of the 2011 conflict, Syrians increasingly relied on group-based categories to infer the inten-

tions and actions of others. Alawites, in particular, often became "hostages" of the regime, as this environment of distrust solidified their alignment with the ruling elite. This fragmentation ultimately benefited the regime by weakening the formation of a unified opposition and preventing alternative power structures from emerging within the dominant Alawite community (Leenders, 2015; Wieland, 2015).

The precarious position of Alawite dissidents during the 2011 protests highlights these dynamics. Carsten Wieland (2015) observes that many Alawites participated in the demonstrations, driven by demands for better living conditions and greater political openness. However, the Sunni-led opposition was often reluctant to integrate Alawite dissidents fully into the movement due to the Alawite community's close association with the regime. As a result, many Alawite protestors withdrew, convinced that others did not trust them despite their willingness to trust others (Wieland, 2015). This situation was further aggravated by historical grievances, as segments of the Sunni opposition viewed the Alawite community as beneficiaries of regime-granted privileges. Mutual distrust weakened the cohesion of the opposition front, while the presence of Alawites in high-ranking positions within intelligence services fueled suspicions that Alawite dissidents were infiltrators or regime collaborators (Wieland, 2015, p. 229).

Finally, the intersection of social, cultural, and religious cleavages with Syria's political and institutional structures must be emphasized. The questionnaire responses reveal that political trust differs markedly from social trust, with sharper polarization between Sunnis and Christians. While Christians demonstrated slightly higher trust in political institutions—particularly in the figure of the president—Sunnis expressed deeper skepticism. For many Christians, the president was not perceived as the primary cause of Syria's challenges during the 2000s. In contrast, Sunnis tended to attribute greater responsibility to the president, reflecting the broader political marginalization they experienced. This overlap between political and social trust underscores the degree to which Syria's political system often favored certain groups at the expense of others, further entrenching societal divisions.

6. Conclusion

The central argument of this study posits that social trust in pre-2011 Syria was heterogeneous and marked by selective dynamics. Generally positive relations between Christians and Muslims contrasted with significant tensions among Muslim subgroups, such as Sunnis and Alawites. This selective distrust was further exacerbated by historical memories of conflicts and the Ba'ath regime's policies of exclusion and favoritism. The core argument of this investigation is that, while positive relations and trust-based interactions existed between certain confessional groups in pre-2011 Syria, the presence of selective distrust—rooted in historical, social, and political factors—may have heightened the vulnerability of Syrian society during the crisis.

The research suggests that distrust toward Alawites can be understood as an extension of distrust toward institutions and political actors. The fact that Alawites are widely associated with the group holding political and military power creates an intersection between political trust and social trust. In this sense, the study contributes to the debate on hori-

zontal inequalities by emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of the role of trust in such contexts.

Inequalities and distrust are intrinsically linked, as situations of political, social, and economic inequality generate vulnerability. It is essential to investigate whether marginalized groups trust institutions and power holders to address their grievances or, conversely, whether they feel even more exposed to those who control material and symbolic resources. On the other hand, those who benefit from the social structure tend to perceive the demands of marginalized groups as threats to the status quo that favors them—not only in material terms but also in relation to their security.

In the Syrian case, there is evidence that individuals associated with the privileged group, even if they did not directly benefit from those privileges, felt a sense of insecurity at the prospect of revenge or indiscriminate violence against their religious group. This social fragility, in turn, may have facilitated the spread of sectarian narratives, further deepening social fragmentation and accelerating the transition from a movement of political contestation to a devastating civil conflict.

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Mahjar Studies in Latin America: Evolution, Theoretical Advances, and Emerging International Relations Perspectives

Estudos Mahjar na América Latina: Evolução, Avanços Teóricos e Perspectivas Emergentes em Relações Internacionais

Estudios Mahjar en América Latina: Evolución, Avances Teóricos y Perspectivas Emergentes en Relaciones Internacionales

Jorge Araneda[1]

ABSTRACT

This essay provides a concise review and statistical analysis of Mahjar studies in Latin America, tracing its evolution from historical and anthropological foundations to its growing engagement with International Relations (IR) in MENA–Latin America interactions. It examines key theoretical contributions (2000–2023) that have shaped this multidisciplinary field, particularly its integration with diaspora studies. The study highlights Latin America's role in global migration scholarship and the significance of IR perspectives in understanding contemporary South-South relations. Finally, the essay offers reflections on key countries and leading scholars contributing to the advancement of this field, providing insights into its future directions and potential for further academic development.
Keywords: *Mahjar, Latin America, MENA, International Relation*

RESUMO

Este ensaio apresenta uma revisão concisa e uma análise estatística dos estudos Mahjar na América Latina, traçando sua evolução desde as bases históricas e antropológicas até seu crescente envolvimento com as Relações Internacionais (RI) nas interações entre MENA e América Latina. Ele examina as principais contribuições teóricas (2000–2023) que moldaram esse campo multidisciplinar, especialmente sua integração com os estudos sobre diáspora. O estudo destaca o papel da América Latina na pesquisa sobre migração global e a importância das perspectivas das RI para compreender as relações Sul-Sul contemporâneas. Por fim, o ensaio oferece reflexões sobre países-chave e acadêmicos influentes que contribuem para o avanço desse campo, fornecendo insights sobre suas direções futuras e seu potencial para maior desenvolvimento acadêmico.

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Palavras-chave: *Mahjar, América Latina, MENA, Relações Internacionais*

RESUMEN

Este ensayo presenta una revisión concisa y un análisis estadístico de los estudios Mahjar en América Latina, trazando su evolución desde sus bases históricas y antropológicas hasta su creciente vinculación con las Relaciones Internacionales (RI) en las interacciones entre MENA y América Latina. Examina las principales contribuciones teóricas (2000–2023) que han moldeado este campo multidisciplinario, especialmente su integración con los estudios sobre diáspora. El estudio destaca el papel de América Latina en la investigación sobre migración global y la importancia de las perspectivas de RI para comprender las relaciones Sur-Sur contemporáneas. Finalmente, el ensayo ofrece reflexiones sobre países clave y académicos influyentes que contribuyen al avance de este campo, proporcionando ideas sobre sus futuras direcciones y su potencial para un mayor desarrollo académico.
Palabras clave: *Mahjar, América Latina, MENA, Relaciones Internacionales*

Introduction

The existing global connectivity from Latin America with many communities of the Bilad-al-Sham that currently constitutes the countries of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Jordan is the result of a long history of emigrations, which began in the mid-19th century. It initiated its migratory processes, constantly searching for new horizons in "Amrika" North and South America. It later shifted towards Africa and Australia and then towards producing nearby oil countries (Arana, 2011; Bartet; Kahht, 2010).

Throughout the 20th century, novel transnational structures and continuous participation in the diverse realities of the Arab countries of origin on the part of the immigrants and their progeny, who turned out a crucible of multiple facts and nonmigratory histories in the diverse receiving societies. On the other hand, the global networks that connect the different communities are linked continuously with new connections based on the confluence of political, economic, and cultural positions and are constantly crossed by social interests maintained with time by institutional, familial

ties, and personal histories. Also, the community's construction in the specific capitals there shaped neuralgic centers of a vast network of communication, globally connected to the communities developed principally in the countries of the Levantine area and nearby others (Balloffet, 2020; Escher, Anton *et al.*, 2015; Mor, 2016; Pastor, 2017).

Moreover, the initial locations, such as small cities or villages inside the current states of Syria or Palestine, turned into a point of reference shared in the global communities that have affirmed multiple identities in varied continents. These globally dispersed communities can be interpreted as personal, family, or group-based strategies for creating and diversifying new shares and economic capital. This type of community that shares global bonds has been analyzed in varied publications on Arab migration in the case of Latin America, North America instance, Australia, and Western Africa (Escher, 2012).

The wide range of studies on the Levantine Arab migration field might illustrate different dimensions of the same topic: the construction, negotiation, and recreation of the identities of Arab immigrants in the context

of national and transnational groups. Nevertheless, the area called the "Al-Sham" differs for specific historical continuities: the legacy of European colonialism and its abrupt reordering of the region in the states - nationals, the interest in the area of the imperial powers and neo-imperial in energy resources, and a recent history of external political-military powerful interventions. That has become a sophisticated pattern of multiple migrations, including massive displacements inside and outside its borders (Fahrenthold, 2019; Schayegh; Arsan, 2015).

Concretely, this essay briefly reviews existing literature in Latin America about the present Middle Eastern Migration from a Latin American perspective. Indeed, a review of the field is not novel (Araneda, 2016; Chitwood, 2017; Fuentes, 2016, 2017; Galán, 2019; Klich, 1995; Klich; Lesser, 1998; Rosemberg, 2014; Velcamp, 1997), but statistical analyses of the studies certainly do. In this regard, this concise and statistical approach tries to address the production of knowledge from the primary studies of Middle Eastern Migration, Muslims present in Latin American countries, and, more recently, the denomination of Mahjar Studies and IR between the Americas and MENA region, focusing on its main themes and suggesting some areas for further consideration and research.

To clarify, *Mahjar* derives from the Arabic word *hijra,* meaning migration, and refers to both the physical place of emigration and a movement within modern Arabic literature with distinctive schools and exponents in the Americas (Badawi, 1975, p. 196). The term *Mahjar studies* first appeared to portray the numerous Arab immigrants' press productions - newspaper, poetry, novels - that settled in the

Americas during the first part of the 20th century and the last decades of Ottoman rule in the Levant and the interconnections between the diasporas and the Arab homelands.

The Mahjar studies study has routinely sat on two bases: the links between history-religion and culture-society, which specialists have framed in the Middle East (Arsan; Karam, 2013; Balloffet, 2015; Bascuñan-Wiley, 2019; Fahrenthold, 2013; Pastor, 2014) Its approach expanded to other disciplines in the last two decades, such as IR studies, Islam in the Americas, and Mahjar literature. However, a situation is essential to address: the academic analysis that makes up the main contributions that various authors have made to Mahjar's studies still needs to be improved.

This review aims to assist and clarify the studies' internal development, delivering a guide for readers interested in Mahjar studies from Latin America and its influence on the approaches of Latin American scholars. This selection pretends to be based on some general internal frames based on a selection of the leading academic contributions that the authors have made to the subject, which was discussed in the first part, not only in light of the usefulness they represent but also the deficiencies they reflect.

Furthermore, this exploratory and descriptive review is presumed to provide the reader with the knowledge to approach the sources, allowing them to examine different subtopics that turn out to be of interest and thereby motivating the development of future innovative and cutting-edge research. In sum, the statistical development results of the Mahjar studies will be presented in different graphs, delivering a concise cartography of the current historical development of Latin American research.

Methodology

Mahjar Studies has become one of the most outstanding phenomena in Latin America due to the massive arrival of people from Arab countries. However, it is not a new phenomenon and is much less well-known in Latin American academia. In fact, according to Jacqueline Hurtado's (2012) classification of descriptive and exploratory research, it is inscribed at a perceptual level. The exploratory level has the quality of studying topics in an introductory state, increasing familiarity with the research event (*Mahyar* or Arab diaspora presence in Latin America), and gathering information to establish the state of the art and the new lines of research that arise from this.

To reach the above objective, databases were constructed through search, systematization, and identification tools. The treatment of the information was aimed at characterizing the main approaches and themes developed by the different authors. The product of the matrix analysis was the establishment of four main themes: a) Main approaches in the Middle Eastern Migration studies 1950-2020; b) the birth of Arab Diaspora studies; c) Consolidation of "Studies of Middle Eastern Diaspora" (2000-2013); and c) Expansion of the Mahjar Studies (2013-2023), of which only the last two sections will be discussed.

This work elaborates on a state-of-the-art, essentially documentary research type that contributes to systematic development based (Hurtado, 2012) on the following question: What primary research was produced from 2000 to 2023 regarding the *Mahjar Studies* in Latin America? This type of research allows the identification of authors who have developed the topic, leaving a precedent regarding themes, theories, and methodologies used.

This essay was developed in three stages. The first consisted of mapping digital libraries, specialized databases, and electronic documentation centers. To achieve this, written criteria were established to guide the delimitation of the unit of analysis. In other words, an Excel tool was developed for its collection and systematization based on previously defined criteria. The material was searched using the following databases: Google Scholar, Redalyc, Dialnet, Scielo, ProQuest, Scopus, DOAJ, JSTOR, and Harvard Digital Collection.

From the previous collection, filtering by keywords and reviewing abstracts and keywords that showed the specificity of the topic, 770 papers were obtained that alluded to the subject of the migration of the Arab population to Latin America (1950-2023). In this context, the academic result represents 612 Journal articles, 92 Books, and 50 book chapters. In that milieu, these statistical groups do not expect to be the whole academic production, contrary to being more an image of the main trends. After reading the archive, 349works were excluded because they were outside the time range for the research [2000-2023], press or opinion articles, pre-print articles, or articles for scientific dissemination purposes.

In other words, the research considered 421 a relevant and substantial document, 375 Journal articles, 36 Books, and 10 book chapters. The fundamental criteria for the selection of the papers were four: to be related to the topic of Arab migrants or refugees in Latin America, to have an investigative character, with an object of study, as well as the research method, and to have addressed the unit of analysis between the years 2000 and 2023. As for the collection instruments used

in this study, they were defined based on primary descriptors, such as characteristics of the documentation, themes, author, methodologic approaches, and discipline from which it originates, and a spatial and temporal delimitation, which is Latin America and the time described above.

The second step was organizing data. The starting point was the work based on the appropriate instruments to fulfill the desired purpose. The state of the art was built by formulating key questions and placing them in the content file (Excel). This instrument was gradually fed once the reading of each text was considered for developing this work (Guevara, 2016).

Finally, the third phase was rigorous and in-depth data analysis. Each document was analyzed based on the coding technique used in qualitative research. Thus creating descriptive codes and interpretive codes. This procedure was used within the content cards designed and subsequently organized in Microsoft Excel. Also, the Microsoft Word tool was used to write, in a more appropriate way, relevant information about the material used, which was subsequently consigned to the cards already described (Escudero; Cortez, 2018). Considering all the above, it is essential to highlight the search exercise in the virtual universe, the writing work, and the interpretation of the information collected throughout the research.

Moreover, this brief essay has some limitations that need to be addressed. First, the collection of data and the production of this database focus primarily on the Latin American academy and its relations with other non-Latin American academics. In other words, the academic productions of non-Latin Americans are marked when Latin American academics quote its work as key. Second, the review does not consider two academic fields, philosophy (political philosophy) and literature, which operate or are engaged in Arab or Muslim authors or works. Third, published theses from bachelor's, Master's, or Ph.D. academics are reviewed in terms of bibliography but not statistically. Fourth, books and articles published in journals without indexation or peer review are not considered. For that reason, personal memories, autobiographies, or family genealogies have the same treatment.

In sum, this essay was divided into three central questions. The initial inquiries are the fundamental procedure and theoretical arguments concerning studying Middle Eastern migrations in Latin American countries. How do we unfold the field from the original method? Besides, was the contemporary theoretical analysis interested in the previous state-of-the--art recommendations in the area? Moreover, what are the new trends in the up-to-date sphere of Mahjar Studies?

Consolidation of "Studies of Middle Eastern Diaspora" (2000-2013).

This period performs consistent work in several languages and outside the Latin American academia (Ex. works of Dr. Luis Mesa Delmonte, Dra. Silvia Montenegro, Dra. Camila Pastor de Maria y Campos, Dr. Paulo G. Pinto, Dr. Oswaldo Truzzi, Dra. Cecilia Baeza, among others) with multidisciplinary method from U.S. academics (Ex. Dr. Paul Amar, Dr. Akram Khater, Dra. Evelyn Alsultany, and Dra. Ella Shohat among others). The essential expressions will be "diaspora" as well as "transnational identities," especially appropriate for explaining the multiple fields of the Palestinian

diaspora/identities (Baeza, 2006, 2012, 2014) and the emergence of Islam.

The emergence of Islam in Latin American countries should be understood as the development of the exhibition of study focused on the topic, and not the existence of Muslims in the Americas, then began as almost parallels with the arrival of European colonialism in the Americas. This new framework will comprehensively examine the research field in Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico. Since 2000, many bachelor's and master's theses in anthropology have been pursued in this topic. Brazil-Argentina (Montenegro, 2008; Pinto, 2011) will lead the field in cooperative studies and collaborative publications, especially in these countries' Anthropology of Islam and Syrian and Lebanese cultural productions.

The new procedures incorporated postcolonial cores and post-Saidianian methodology, and they are interested in communicating a further Anthropological examination that rapidly grows to the rest of the Latin American universities and complements earlier historical and sociological inquiries. These new frameworks will be used first in the influential theses of the Triple-Frontier (Argentina—Brazil—Paraguay), which tries to comprehend the connection of Arabs and Muslim communities not just in a comparative analysis between these three countries but also in the connections with Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine that strengthen these communities (Karam, 2011; Montenegro, 2007; Páez; Luis, 2012).

Chart.-1 Analysis of knowledge production by country [2000-2023]
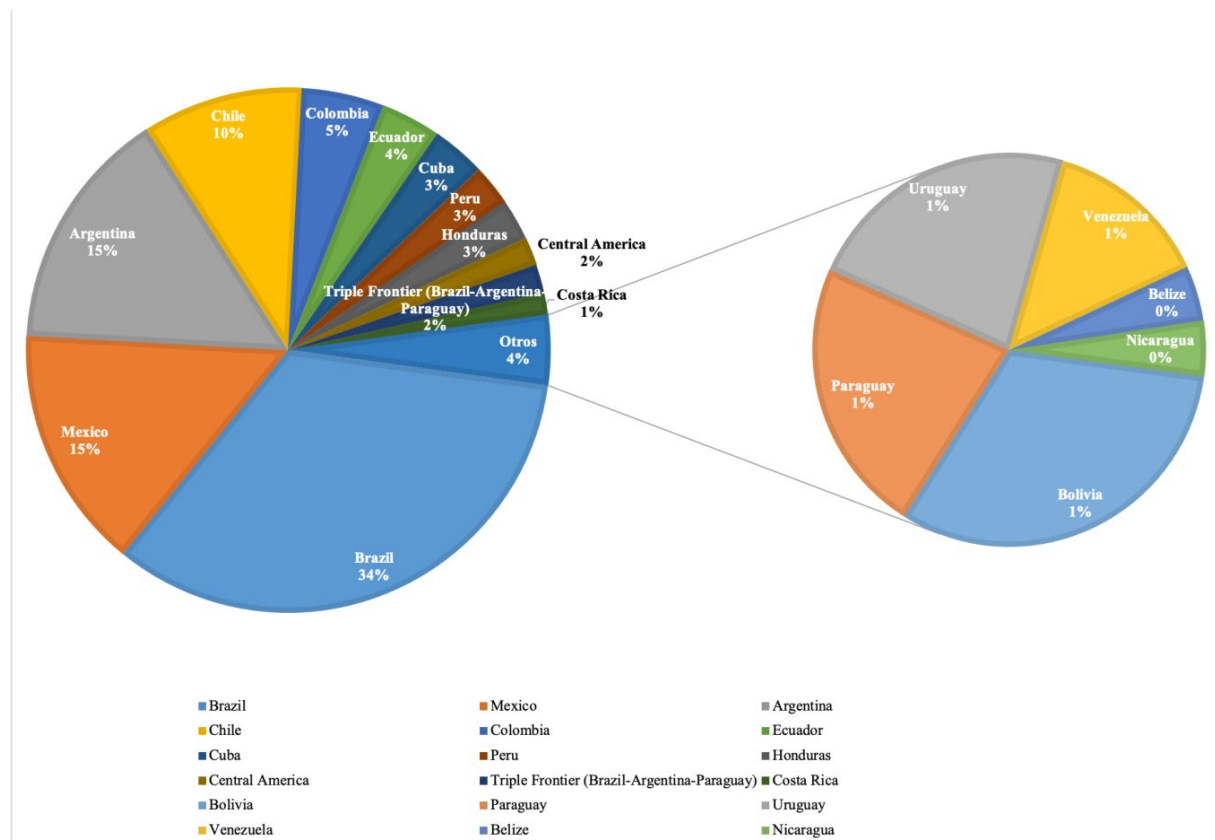
Data and graph created by the author based on original research

It is feasible to verify the current display of knowledge in this field in Latin American nations (see Chart 1) by reviewing the significant countries in which academic production is focused. Furthermore, it is plausible to argue that critical theoretical and methodological inquiries or new collaborations with non-Latin American partners in this dynamic academic space increase.

For that reason, in this period, Brazil (34%) and Argentina (15%) present a unique place for collaborative production "Triple Frontier" – with more than 2% of all the Mahjar production - and a center for new Anthropological engagement in diasporic/transnational cases, Brazilian academia from 2000 present a consolidated Middle East department, and an extended collaboration with Anthropological scholars of Argentina. Mexico (15%) has a substantial academic community of Mahjar studies, but due to its geographical position, a collaboration between Chilean or Argentinian scholars in Mexico can be more complicated.

In that regard, from the initial reflection on the outcomes of Akram Khater (2001), Silvia Montenegro (2006), John Tofik Karam (2007), and Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp (2007), among others, these academic productions stand out as they crossed further Latin American cartographies and relocated in the sphere of the Mahjar Studies, articulated propositions of how Arab and Muslims identities confronted the troubles of the increase of global capitalism, more liquid and transnational identities, and for some the wish to turn on to the MENA region.

These works, in distinct topics, studied the transnational communities and kinships that helped to reshape the modern identities in Arab/Muslim communities in Latin America,

in the diverse diasporas, and in some instances in the original MENA societies—consolidating the understanding of the immigrational experiences as a Transnational, multidirectional and performative. It is plausible to agree that these studies, among others, symbolized the appearance of critical outlooks and transnational archival methodologies affiliated with the turn to the Mahjar historiography field.

With the arrival of multidirectional emigration and performative identities in Diaspora Studies, studies in this period focused on transnational circuits and social fields, highlighting the flows of persons, ideas, means, and ideologies between them in South-South regions (Castro, 2011; Chagas, 2013; Fahrenthold, 2013; Galindo; Baeza; Brun, 2014; Ghattas, 2012; Hyland, 2011).

Additionally, after 9/11 and the beginning of the War on Terror policies from the U.S. administration, Latin American anthropologists were concerned with daily social interplay as well as postcolonial and feminist analyses of the theorization of space and boundaries. In this context, this signifies the consolidation of the study of Islam in the Americas, particularly the family - micro-communities - as a fundamental study factor and gendered performatives (Araneda, 2019b; Hamid, 2007; Karam, 2010; Limorté, 2011; Taub, 2008) become evident as crucial to inducting and transferring transnational cultural networks. For example, these wells are the starting point of the reflections on Halal markets in Latin America (Araneda, 2019a; Hamid; Rego, 2018) and the inquiries about consumption between Latin America and the MENA region.

Notably, in these ten years, the Latin American academics involved in the Diaspora Studies of Arab/Muslim experiences have made

genuine efforts to address a complete review through a transformation in examining primary and secondary sources, multidisciplinary methodologies, and analytic strategies. Examples of this are the regular use of the Mahjar Literature in the Americas to understand the socio-historical process in the region. These presented a new challenge for the researchers: they had to become familiar with a broader range of national and regional historiographies, archives in multiple locations (E.g., MENA region national archives or newspapers), and access to private or familiar records in several languages.

Equally crucial in countries like Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, some members of the Arab/Muslim communities were able to claim an elite position abroad and engage in a foreign political agenda (Baeza, 2012, 2016; Baeza; Pinto, 2016). These multiple and dynamic complexities have manifested themselves in the brand-new Latin American researchers of the phenomenon of Arab migration to Latin America, who are much more linked to transdisciplinary studies than to historical or sociological methods (Donelli; Gonzalez, 2018).

Chart.- 2 Research production by field of study within the Mahjar studies. [1950-2023/24]
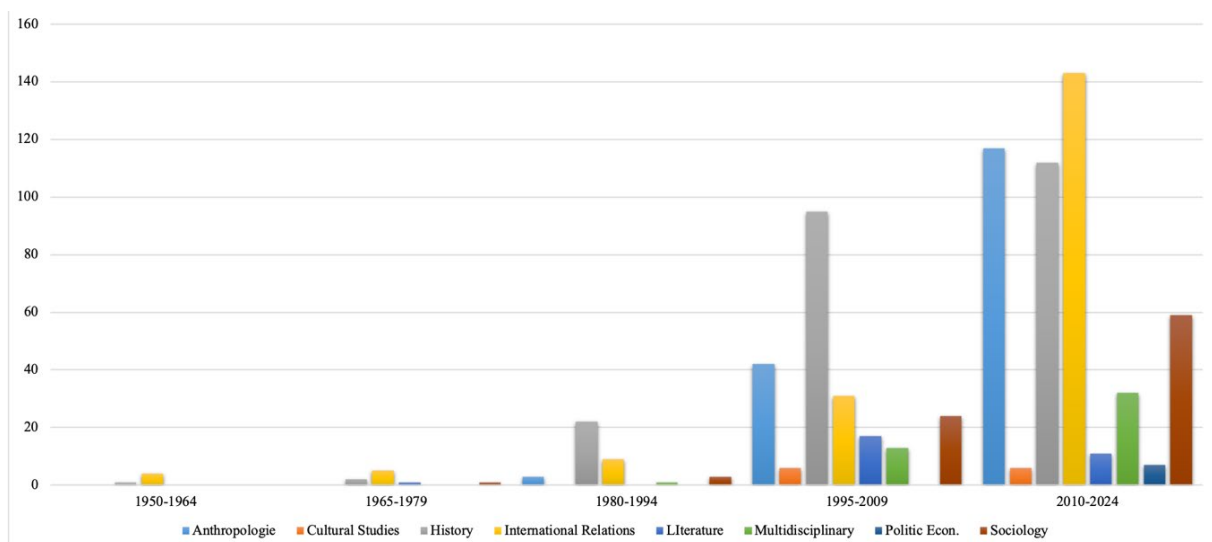
Data and graph created by the author based on original research

More specifically, the two main expanding and spreading disciplines in the Mahjar field are anthropology and IR studies, which are taking the lead of the more established historical methods. Nevertheless, historical approaches are still intact in statistical terms; their appearance is indisputable in most multidisciplinary research and the background of cultural studies, sociology, and the most recent IR field studies. Notably, IR studies are one of the most widespread of the three stages regarding statis-

tical results, followed by Anthropology studies.

In sum, the main features of the Diaspore Studies period were the consolidation of multidisciplinary programs and the use of mixed methodologies in the investigation. Most values analyses attempt to understand particularities inside the Arab/Muslim communities, as well as the employment of critical use of post-colonialism (or de-colonialism in some cases), post-structuralism methodologies, and high-critics of the original postulated of Said inquiries

(García, 2018; Hamid, 2012; Marques, 2007; Montenegro, 2004). Furthermore, the pivotal critics of official narratives of Latin American state-building and the role of the Arab/Muslim diaspora, as well as the response of the Latin American state and its Arab/Muslim communities to the Arab Spring/uprising, Finally, the initial process of a more extensive range of IR productions with non-Latin America academic collaborations.

Expansion of the Mahjar Studies (2013-2023)

In the current period (2013-2023), the studies of Arab/Muslim communities and their cultural and political productions are on a more explicit path due to the reaction of the specialization of Latin American scholars, many of them with PhD degrees from recognized universities in the USA or Europe, and conducting field research in the MENA region.

The second group of academics actively involved in the consolidation of "Islam-Latino" (Medina, 2014, 2019a) is particularly interested in the conversions of new Muslims in the Latin American region, and the third group of young scholars primarily occupied in Mexico (Cuadro, 2016, 2019; Kuri, 2016; Tawil, 2019)– Brazil (Amorim, 2011; Brun, 2018; Brun, 2016; Funk, 2016; Gonzalez, 2016) and Argentina (Botta, 2010a, 2011; Brun; Alles; Albaret, 2016; Cuadro, 2014; Fabani, 2016) is involved in the IR studies between the MENA region and Latin America, publishing several journal articles and books years after the Arabs Spring/Uprising (Baeza, 2015; Cuadro, 2016; Galindo; Baeza; Brun, 2014; Pérez-Bustillo, 2016). It is essential to highlight that those scholars work in novel multidisciplinary books and journal articles inside and outside Latin American borders. These relate the practices of the preceding periods as pivotal to interlock in its specialization, particularly the IR studies.

Chart.-3 Evolution of the printing language of Mahjar studies [1950-2023/24].
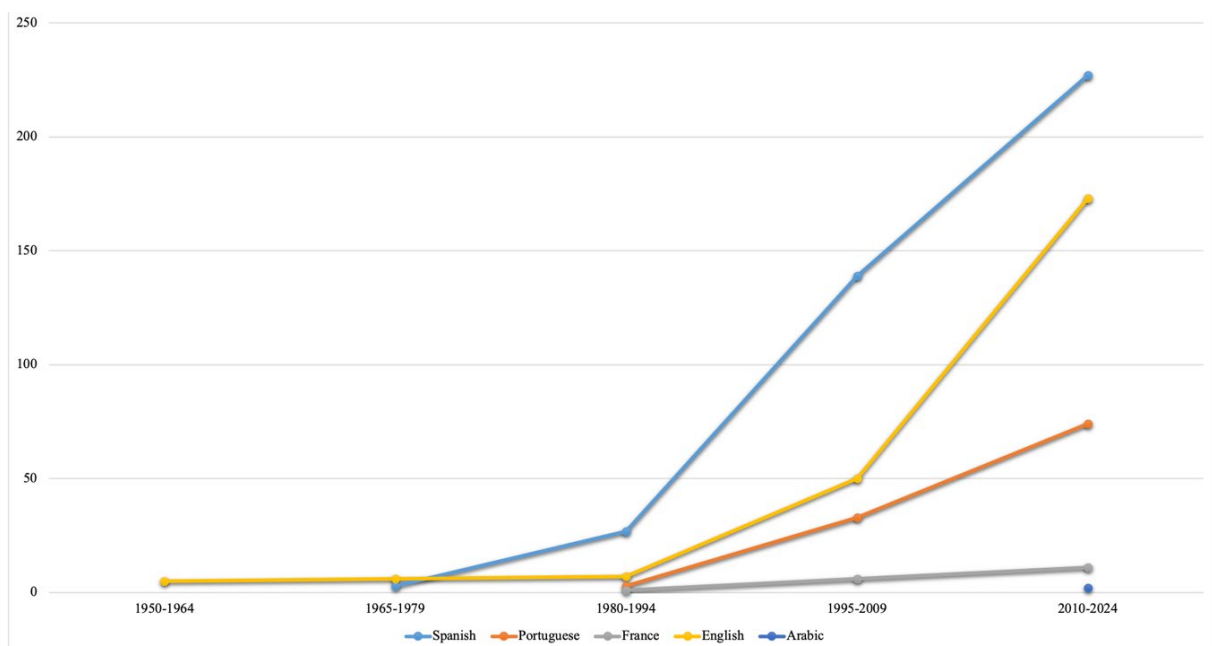
Data and graph created by the author based on original research

At the same time, the contemporary fourth generation of the Arab experience in the Americas had to turn their traditions and cultural expressions towards the family or Arab communities throughout the 20th century. Also, since Latin America is geographically distant from Bilal as-Sham, they only knew their old communities of origin through photography or stories of infrequent travelers, their only source of retaining contact. However, over the past two decades, the identity of Arab-Latino American descendants has been dramatically influenced by their access to transnational contexts of more convenient and faster connectivity, cheaper travel, and widespread use of cable television and the Internet.

These multiple and dynamic complexities have manifested themselves in the new Latin American researchers of the phenomenon of Latin-Arab diaspora, linked to Transnational approaches, and that have put in doubt the mythological or hegemonic stories that, to a greater or lesser extent, had been transmitted by the first investigations related to the area.

In that regard, these new researchers will need to be involved in examining the Latin American Dabke, elites, and political groups interested in influencing Middle Eastern countries' domestic and foreign policies.

Furthermore, the internal changes in the academia concert to Middle Eastern diaspora contribute to unlocking the entrepreneurial potential of the continuous obsession with the exact numbers of Middle Eastern descent in the Americas, unveiling migrant narratives dominated by an orthodox or catholic Christian intelligentsia or great successful men that dominated gender studies against the accounts of all experiences. How do we understand the multiple affinities with the post-Nakba and diaspora narratives of 1967 or post-Oslo events? Or the experiences of recovery of lost ethnicity thanks to the new connectivity in social networks, among others?

Similarly, new scholars are focusing on exploring refugee history to understand resettlement relations (Beaume, 2019; Calegari, 2018; Schiocchet, 2019; Ubialli, 2018), sexuality, new cartographies of religious systems (Balloffet, 2020; Bennett, 2020; Gomez; Medina, 2019b; Morales, 2018; Pastor, 2017), and all new performative ethnicity expressions, which is a critical frontier in studying Mahjar historiography.

In this period (2013-2023) co-author books will lead the studies, for example, "The Middle East and Brazil; Perspectives on the New Global South" (Farah *et al.*, 2014) "Crescent over another Horizon; Islam in Latin America, The Caribbean, and Latino USA" (Narbona; Pinto; Karam, 2015); "Entre o Velho e a Novo Mundo: a diáspora Palestina Desde o Oriente Médio à América Latina" (Schiocchet, 2015); or "Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian Communities in the World: Theoretical Frameworks and Empirical Studies" (Escher, Anton *et al.*, 2015) among others. Additionally, it is possible to uncover scholars who are highly involved in a transnational and multidisciplinary approach (Aidi, 2014; Balloffet, 2020; Truzzi; Stern, 2018).

Additionally, one crucial contribution in this period was the creation in 2013 of the Journal Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies, published by the Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies at North Carolina State University. This journal is a unique space for engaging in transnational academic production of knowledge and theoretical dis-

cussion. In sum, this new flow of bibliography links with Mahjar cartographies more substantively correlates well-defined Mahjar studies inside the region and connects more meaningfully with other historiographical subfields.

In parallel with the Mahjar Studies' consolidation, it is possible to recognize that from the beginning of this period, scholars from Brazil - Mexico, and Argentina were involved in the IR ties between the MENA region and Latin America. These IR ties included the diplomatic bonds and opportunities of South-South relations, for example, the works of Cecilia Baeza, Paul Amar, Elodie Brun, Mariela Cuadro, Paulo Botta, Marta Tawil Kuri, Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi, among others. They are bringing the "Global South" perspective on Middle East-Latin American relations to check how this framework of geostrategic positioning has emerged in different configurations of political and economic change (Amar, 2014).

Chart.- 4 Development of knowledge production of academics working in Latin American and non-Latin American universities.
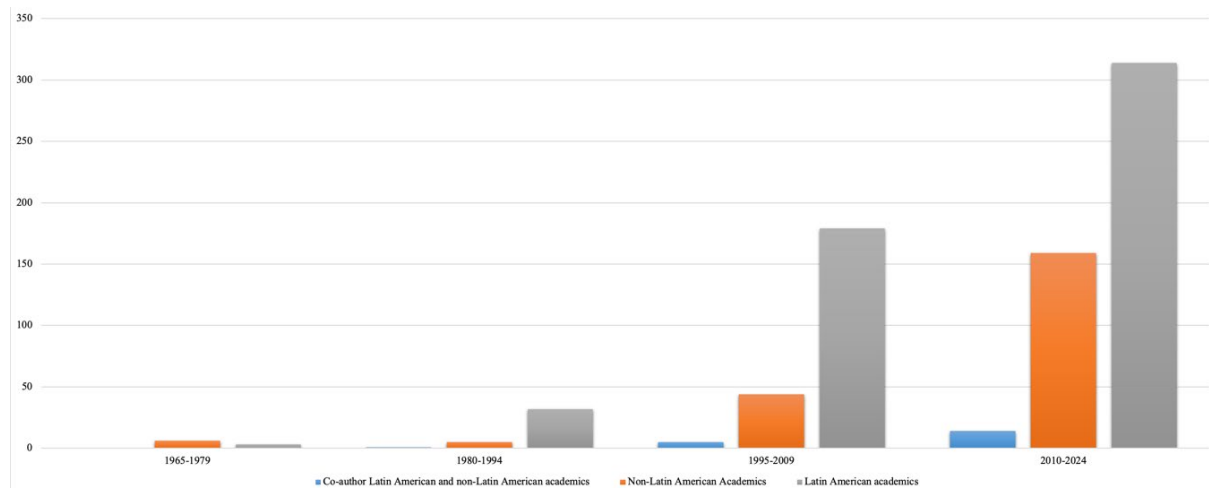
Data and graph created by the author based on original research

Mahjar's studies represent an internal development among scholars interested in cases inside Latin America. Until 2010, most of the scholars working in the field were working in Latin American institutions; currently, almost half of the production regarding Latin American Mahjar is produced by non-Latin American scholars. This situation allows both parties to engage in more collaborative production or cross-border studies.

In that regard, the collaborative enterprise investigates the Arab Spring/Uprising from the lens of Latin American countries, demonstrating the political interconnections and concerns about this new Middle East. They are mainly concerned about the latest strategies of global resistance to the Neo-imperialism pressures, the historical legacy of Left parties in Latino American political history, and the anterior participation within the Non-Aligned Movement, or Cuban and Venezuela political experiences. In works. For example, "Levantamientos en el Mundo árabe. Posicionamientos y lecturas Desde Sudamérica" (Vagni, 2011); "Diversity behind Unity: Latin America's Response to the Arab Spring" (Galindo; Baeza;

Brun, 2014) or "Building Support for the Asad Regime: The Syrian Diaspora in Argentina and Brazil and the Syrian Uprising," (Baeza; Pinto, 2016) among others. These IR studies' works involve a comparative examination of political and economic practices, which have given rise to a scholarship on advancing free-market states, corporatism, and dictatorship.

Chart.- 5 Analysis of knowledge production in the field of International Studies.
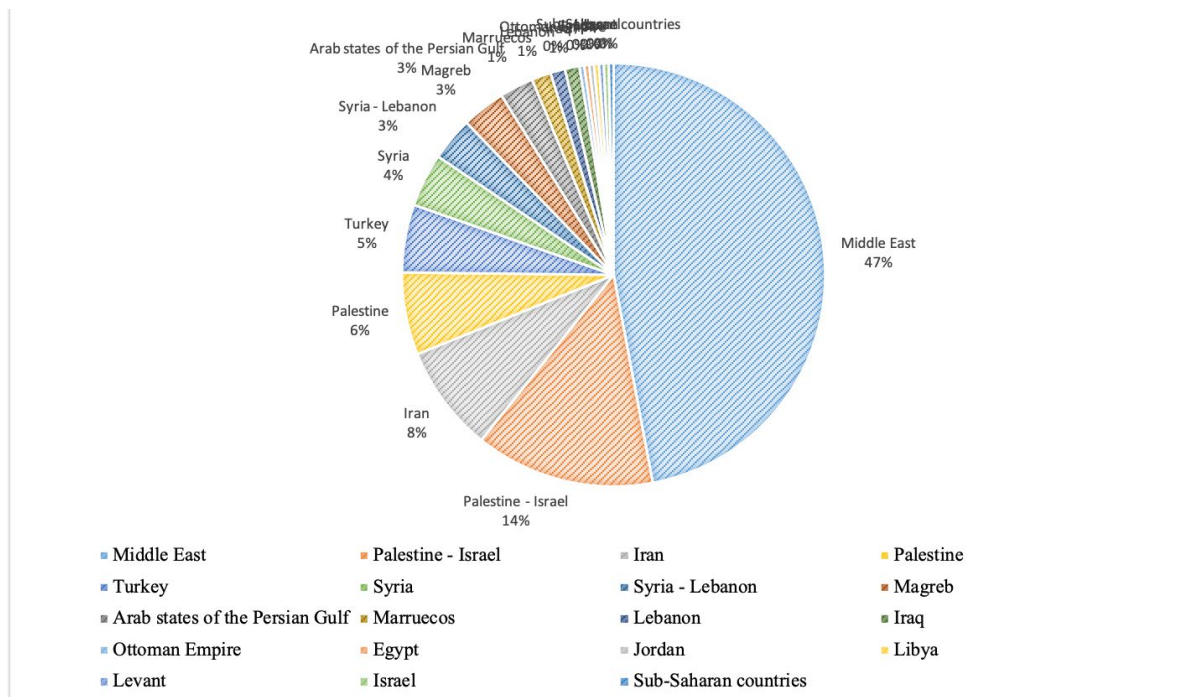
Data and graph created by the author based on original research

In sum, combining these diverse methodological and disciplinary approaches to combining accounts and political realities of the Middle East and Latin America has entangled and shaped the contours of the studies and the understandings of these regions in the Global South. Essentially, it is significant that the modifications of the countries that started to interlock the Latin American Scholar, predominant from the first period, were the Palestinian–Israeli affairs (Alba; Silverburg, 2020; Ehrlich, 2019; Garduño García, 2016; Grantham, 2019; Zanella Giurfa, 2018) in the international agenda (14% of the period); the Palestinian situation under the International Law, or the ideological connections and support from some Latina American nations (6% of the period). The current IR studies condition inaugurated and consolidated other Middle Eastern countries, such as Iran (Figueroa Sepúlveda, 2018; Padilla, 2019; Sorio, 2016), Turkey (Botta, 2010b; Gonzalez Levaggi, 2016; Rodriguez; Tawil, 2015), and the Arabian Gulf, and in a small but novel study, the Maghreb region. In conclusion, though the most notable investigation is presented from a general point of view and indicates the political and economic relations with the Middle East as a whole region, it is clear that certain countries are taking the lead in IR research from Latin American universities.

Conclusion: between changes and challenges

This new repertoire of theoretical and methodological approaches to the state of the field was one of many challenges for Latin American academia. From our point of view, the interest in Postcolonial or Decolonial analytical procedures and the use of postmodernism methods revealed an ethical commitment not only from the research to the subject but also from the academia itself.

In sum, in the last 50 years of continuous work in critical development inside the Arab/Muslim Migrations—Diaspora Studies and Mahyar Studies and related fields, the most prominent works and state-of-the-art end with critics and recommendations for the current and future generations of scholars who will engage in academia.

In that regard, it is unsurprising that most are still valid and resonate in Latin American academia. First, one of the earliest recommendations is the work of the Latin American scholar; it does not just involve distinguishing lines of research, resolving against sensationalist speeches, recognizing and avoiding populist debates, and feeding new reflections because scholars will be called upon to engage with the general public and collaborate with government administration.

Secondly, the scholar must acknowledge an increasingly collaborative scholarship, with numerous private, cultural, religious, and political institutions in their own country, and try to open to its rich cultural heritage. Future research on Mahjar's Studies and its impact on Latin American society and culture must address the intersections of class, race, and gender in the visual arts. Moreover,

it encourages ties with experts in non-profit associations to produce beneficial research support infrastructure. Third, acknowledging the accessibility difficulties and uncovering a way to recognize these constraints while concurrently advancing to challenge them productively. Fourth, the ultimate aim of contributing to the state of knowledge of the matter, it will be necessary to build multidisciplinary hypotheses, which is almost the exclusive way to generate discussions that enrich the debate around this topic.

On the other hand, the university education system is still centered on a generalist standard with no room for specialization, which is the leading cause of the underdevelopment of contemporary Middle East studies in the Latin American region. Such specialization may only occur once sufficient specialists in different fields exist. One aspect stands out: except for the most prominent country previously mentioned, most Latin American countries recently started teaching about Middle Eastern cultures.

Finally, the Middle East fields in Latin America need more than anything else scholars with career prospects; statistically, it is impressive to perceive the quantity of excellent thesis, with one subsequent publication, and then the scholar's departure from the field. Any influential academia requires their academic efforts to a critical field of study that will simultaneously allow us to understand and appreciate a region of the world too often ignored in the study of global Islam and Mahjar Studies while at the same time situating an aspect of the story of the diaspora in the South-South region hitherto marginalized and often overlooked.

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