

An Ethnographic Comparison of the Syrio-Lebanese Communities in Northwest Argentina and Buenos Aires

Marcus Helble, Class of 2021

Purpose

The initial goal of my research this summer was to analyze two Syrio-Lebanese immigrant communities in Argentina. The country's capital city of Buenos Aires and northwestern provinces like Tucumán, Santiago del Estero, and Salta have boasted significant numbers of Argentine Arab residents since the beginning of the 20th century, especially in comparison with the rest of the country. These Argentine Arabs, who almost entirely emigrated from what is now Syria and Lebanon, consist of the third-largest ancestry group in Tucumán province. Up to three million Argentines today are believed to have at least partial Syrio-Lebanese ancestry. Statistics like those drove me to investigate this community, notable in a country that proudly highlights its European heritage and character. My project sought to compare Syrio-Lebanese immigration and communities in northwest Argentina and Buenos Aires.

Methods

Although I had originally planned to conduct this project on the ground in Argentina, given the travel restrictions in place I transitioned to researching remotely. Because of this, my two-week research project consisted mainly of examining secondary literature on Syrio-Lebanese immigration to Argentina. In order to properly place this phenomenon within its appropriate context, I devoted significant time to determining what drove immigrants from the Middle East and what motivated them to immigrate to Argentina specifically. This required reading on the late Ottoman Empire, religious communities in Syria and Lebanon, and the history of immigration to Argentina. I also looked through Argentine census data to understand when these immigrants arrived. Census data also provided information on the religious orientation, gender, and age of many arrivals in the country. I spent the last portion of my research reading Spanish-language articles on Syrio-Lebanese communities in the Argentine northwest and Buenos Aires specifically. These articles provided important information on the demographics of the two communities. Finally, I plan to continue this project by traveling to Argentina in January to conduct interviews and gather oral histories of Arab Argentines.

Results

The product of my research this summer was an academic paper analyzing the demographics and defining elements of the two Syrio-Lebanese communities. I found that Syrio-Lebanese immigrants who settled in northwest Argentina arrived there due to the newly constructed railroad lines in the country, which made such a remote corner of Argentina more accessible to immigrants arriving at the port city of Buenos Aires. The first Syrio-Lebanese immigrants to northwest Argentina were attracted by the economic success that region had at the time, booming because of the burgeoning sugarcane industry. What followed was successive waves of chain migration, with communities of immigrants from the same small towns in Syria and Lebanon arriving in the same cities and villages in northwest Argentina. This is why certain cities in Argentina, like San Miguel de Tucumán, boast proportionally high numbers of Syrio-Lebanese immigrants of the Shiite Alawi sect, for example, or why most Syrio-Lebanese immigrants in the northwestern city of La Banda originated in the small village of Amiun in northern Lebanon. The Buenos Aires Syrio-Lebanese community consisted of even greater religious diversity, with a large Muslim and Jewish minority not present in the northwest. Buenos Aires was the home of significantly more religious and community organizations, Arabic-language newspapers, and Syrio-Lebanese neighborhoods. Finally, my paper concluded with a brief discussion of racial discourse in Argentina and how Syrio-Lebanese immigrants played into it upon arrival.

Faculty Mentor: Javier Cikota

Funded by the Latin American Studies Research Award