

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Globalizing Latin American Studies: New Frontiers in Latin American-Middle Eastern Exchange

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This essay reviews the following works:

Brimos: Imigração sírio-libanesa no Brasil e seu caminho até a política. By Diogo Bercito. São Paulo: Fósforo, 2019. Pp. 269. BRL\$74.90 paperback. ISBN: 9786589733102.

The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean. By Ken Chitwood. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2021. Pp. x + 285. \$95.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781626379480.

Peronism as a Big Tent: The Political Inclusion of Arab Immigrants in Argentina. By Raanan Rein and Ariel Noyjovich. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. Pp. xvi + 230. CAD \$75.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780228008828.

Latin American Relations with the Middle East: Foreign Policy in Times of Crisis. Edited by Marta Tawil Kuri and Élodie Brun. New York: Routledge, 2022. Pp. xvii + 283. \$160.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781032206790.

Manifold Destiny: Arabs at an American Crossroads of Exceptional Rule. By John Tofik Karam. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2020. Pp. xv + 315. \$39.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780826501325.

Brasil e Oriente Médio: O poder da sociedade civil. Edited by Álvaro Vasconcelos, Arlene Cledesha, and Feliciano de Sá Guimarães. São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, Instituto de Relações Internacionais, 2021. Pp. 189. Open access e-book. ISBN: 9788569229032. <https://doi.org/10.11606/9788569229032>.

In an essay that appeared in these pages over a decade ago, the historian Evelyn Hu-DeHart lamented the lack of research on Latin America's rich tapestry of (especially non-European) immigrant populations, posing the provocative question: "Where are the *Chinos* and *Turcos*?"¹ Fortuitously, she noted, this lacuna was rapidly being filled,

¹ Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "Multiculturalism in Latin American Studies: Locating the 'Asian' Immigrant; or, Where Are the *Chinos* and *Turcos*?" *Latin American Research Review* 44, no. 2 (2009): 235–242, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.0.0100>. The latter term, which is commonly used throughout Latin America, owes its origins to the fact that many early Arab immigrants arrived with passports issued by the Ottoman Empire. Notably, it is frequently deployed as a slur to evoke long-standing stereotypes—common also to anti-Jewish biases—that vilify Arab-Latin Americans as shrewd, thrifty, overly focused on commercial success, and insufficiently committed to the national project. Such caricatured notions also find expression in scholarly texts. Indeed, in a classic work of Brazilian historiography and sociological analysis, the famed anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro observed with remarkable forthrightness that the fact that "the Arabs have been the most successful immigrants . . . can be explained to a

and subsequent years have borne witness to a relative bonanza of works on Latin America's myriad past and present global entanglements, especially in regard to migration, cultural ties, and political and economic linkages, including with the Middle East.²

Yet this research area can still be characterized as nascent and significant gaps remain. For example, relatively few works critically analyze the class dimensions of (and within) these communities or the utility of applying the oft-invoked framework of South-South relations to capture the complex political and normative aspects of cross-regional ties. There also continues to be a lack of multisited scholarship that brings together on-the-ground empirical analysis from both regions.

Nevertheless, significant advances in the scholarship on Latin American–Middle Eastern exchange are readily apparent, and it is by now fair to speak of a “second generation” of recent texts on associated topics. I review six such works here, each of which contributes to our understanding of heretofore insufficiently explored topics. Specifically, these texts highlight the political incorporation of Arab Latin Americans and the formation of Arab Latin American political elites, the ways Muslims and Latin Americans of Middle Eastern origin are commonly “Othered” (including, prominently, at the Triple Frontier, where Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet), and the evolution of Latin American foreign policies toward the Middle East, including vis-à-vis the participation of oft-overlooked civil society organizations.

Taken together, these works reveal the multifaceted nature of interregional relations, historically and contemporarily, as well as the indelible political, economic, and social imprints left on Latin America by migratory flows. More broadly, they speak to the need to understand Latin America as *global* Latin America—including vis-à-vis a similarly “global Middle East.”³

Global Latin America and the Global Middle East

To appreciate what is at stake in the globalization of Latin American studies as a transdisciplinary field, it is necessary to highlight the traditional, unglobal posture of much outside scholarship about the region, as well as the extent to which contemporary works put Latin America into dialogue with other regions—especially beyond Europe and North America—and broader global dynamics.

Within the Global North social-science mainstream, Latin America (like other parts of the Global South) has often been conceptualized as a region of analytical interest for its complex internal dynamics (relating, for example, to recurring bouts of authoritarian rule, democratization, transitional justice, “modernization” and economic development, and social mobilization). Yet until recently, these have infrequently been conceptualized as

large degree by the casual attitude they have in addressing and working with the local society: armed with prejudices and incapable of any solidarity, detached from any loyalty and family or social obligations. All of this allows them to concentrate their entire effort on getting rich.” See Darcy Ribeiro, *The Brazilian People: The Formation and Meaning of Brazil* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 317–318.

² See, e.g., the migration-focused works discussed in Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, “New Waves of Immigration and Departure in Modern Latin America,” *Latin American Research Review* 56, no. 4 (2021): 946–957, <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.1669>. Other recent texts focusing on “Arab and/or Islamic migration and presence across the Americas” are reviewed in Thiago Henrique Mota, “Muslims, Moriscos, and Arabic-Speaking Migrants in the New World,” *Latin American Research Review* 55, no. 4 (2020): 820–828, <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.1197>. For an overview of recent works on Judaism in Latin America, see Ilan Stavans, “Normal Jews?,” *Latin American Research Review* 57, no. 3 (2022): 695–707, <https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2022.37>.

³ Lily Pearl Balloffet, *Argentina in the Global Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

global processes in which Latin America plays a substantive role. To be sure, various external forces—namely, colonialism, imperialism, interventionism, and their legacies—are widely understood to have shaped Latin America in myriad ways (hence Greg Grandin’s deservedly oft-cited framing of the region as the “[US] empire’s workshop”).⁴ However, the notions that Latin America exercises agency (or at least matters) in world affairs, is more than a generally passive recipient of global flows, and is meaningfully connected to other regions (including through migration) have only recently begun to resonate in the northern academy.

Fortunately, the “methodological nationalism” (or “regionalism”) that has long characterized outside analysis of Latin America has started to give way to new works—including recent books with evocative titles such as *Global Latin America*, *The World That Latin America Created*, and *Planetary Longings*—that foreground the region’s global embeddedness and world-making potential.⁵ As another manifestation of this favorable trend, explorations of Latin America’s diverse linkages with the Middle East have also risen in frequency and prominence. Hence Paul Amar’s assessment that we are witnessing “the maturation of a new field of transregional study, the crystallization of a new generation of transdisciplinary and transnational scholarship, and the boldness of a new set of institutions and research centers.”⁶

Scholarly works produced before and during the early 2000s “boom” in Latin American–Middle Eastern ties focused primarily on two sets of issues: first, political and economic relations, especially growing commercial links and Latin America’s long-standing interest in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and second, the experiences of Arab immigrants who began to settle in the region in large numbers in the early 1900s, as well as how Latin America has been shaped by (and responded to) their arrival and presence, particularly in cultural terms.⁷ The six works under examination build off of this existing scholarship, address several notable lacunae (even if, as noted, others remain), and add nuance and depth to our understanding of key interregional dynamics.

In Diogo Bercito’s *Brimos: Imigração sírio-libanesa no Brasil e seu caminho até a política* and Raanan Rein and Ariel Noyjovich’s *Peronism as a Big Tent: The Political Inclusion of Arab Immigrants in Argentina*, the primary focus is on how members of Latin America’s largest Arab communities were incorporated into local, regional, and national politics. The trend that motivates Bercito’s analysis is increasing Arab Brazilian political involvement, culminating in the present with figures such as Michel Temer, Fernando Haddad, and Guilherme Boulos. For their part, Rein and Noyjovich analyze the midcentury rule of Juan Perón, highlighting an earlier and more incipient process through which (some) Arab Argentines were welcomed into the body politic.

Providing a partial contrast to more sanguine integration stories, two other texts—John Tofik Karam’s *Manifold Destiny: Arabs at an American Crossroads of Exceptional Rule* and Ken Chitwood’s *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*—highlight the embeddedness and the “Othering” of Middle Eastern immigrants and their descendants in the region. Karam addresses a major gap in various literatures by interrogating the oft-invoked

⁴ Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Owl Books, 2007).

⁵ Matthew C. Gutmann and Jeffrey Lesser, eds., *Global Latin America: Into the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Margarita Fajardo, *The World That Latin America Created: The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America in the Development Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022); Mary Louise Pratt, *Planetary Longings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

⁶ Paul Amar, ed., *The Middle East and Brazil: Perspectives on the New Global South* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 7.

⁷ Kevin Funk, *Rooted Globalism: Arab-Latin American Business Elites and the Politics of Global Imaginaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022). In the second chapter, I provide an overview of existing works in English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

(but, as he argues, unsubstantiated) characterization of the Triple Frontier—home to a large and thriving business community of Arabs, including many Muslims—as a site of unadulterated lawlessness and terrorist intrigue. His critical analysis reveals the pathways through which the border area became ensnared by the logic of the US-led Global War on Terror, with the aforementioned populations demonized, turned into suspects, and subjected to illiberal treatment, including by the region’s (ostensibly) democratic governments. Chitwood’s text appears to be the first systematic English-language overview of diverse Muslim populations in the regions, highlighting both their centrality to Latin American and Caribbean societies (as well as to global Islam) and their struggle for visibility and inclusion.

The last two works analyze interregional relations. In *Latin American Relations with the Middle East: Foreign Policy in Times of Crisis*, coeditors Marta Tawil Kuri and Élodie Brun and their fellow contributors provide an updated analysis of bilateral political and economic ties, highlighting how Latin American foreign policies have navigated the period subsequent to the early 2000s interregional boom, along with the overlapping political, economic, and other crises that have subsequently afflicted both regions. Finally, *Brasil e Oriente Médio: O poder da sociedade civil*—edited by Álvaro Vasconcelos, Arlene Clemesha, and Feliciano de Sá Guimarães—goes beyond the typical focus on state-to-state interactions by chronicling the activities of, and championing a greater role for, Brazilian civil society in the region.

Collectively, these six works highlight the variegated nature of the migratory, political, economic, social, and cultural ties that bind these seemingly distant regions; indeed, as is clear, there is a mutual imbrication of global Latin America and the global Middle East that has fundamentally shaped the essence of each. Building off other recent works of interregional scholarship, these texts both further our understanding of traditional topics of interest (e.g., foreign policy, migration) and address significant gaps in diverse literatures (e.g., the Triple Frontier, Islam). Most broadly, they evoke the fundamental importance of situating Latin America vis-à-vis the extraregional world and, in so doing, contribute to the ongoing “globalization” of Latin American studies—although, as noted earlier and explored in greater depth below, significant lacunae in the scholarship on Latin American–Middle Eastern exchange remain.

From immigrants to citizens: Becoming political agents

Unlike the other texts, Bercito’s *Brimos*—the title of which refers to a typical Arabic pronunciation of *primos* (cousins)—is aimed at a nonacademic audience. It seeks to provide an accessible, Portuguese-language overview of a striking phenomenon in Brazil (and, concomitantly, elsewhere throughout the region) that remains unknown to many: that is, the rise of an elite class of Arab-descendant politicians (18). With an estimated 140,000 Arab migrants having arrived in Brazil between 1880 and 1969 (10), millions of Arab-descendant peoples (primarily of Lebanese and Syrian ancestry) today call Brazil home. It is one of numerous Latin American countries to have had a president with Arab heritage, a list that also includes Argentina, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Honduras, and some of these more than once. Brazil’s first (known) Arab-descendant leader, Temer, assumed the presidency after the highly dubious removal of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and served until 2018. His deep unpopularity and stage setting for Jair Bolsonaro’s subsequent election aside, Temer’s ascent is also significant in Bercito’s retelling for what it reveals about the “path to politics” pursued by this group, as well as transnational Latin American–Middle Eastern dynamics more broadly.⁸

Drawing from (and bringing to popular audiences) scholarly accounts by pioneering thinkers such as Oswaldo Truzzi and Karam, Bercito highlights the stories behind the Arab

⁸ Translations throughout are my own.

community's path from humble beginnings to political prominence (15, 122–123).⁹ The general trajectory is well known—with significant numbers of Arab immigrants and their descendants eventually accumulating sufficient wealth from small-scale peddling to open stores and other businesses and, subsequently, join the professional class. However, Bercito adds the important caveat that the (convenient) rags-to-riches narrative overlooks the extent to which many Arabs journeyed to the Americas not precisely to escape destitution but to attempt to preserve a relatively comfortable lifestyle that was no longer viable in a declining Ottoman Empire (45).

Having achieved some level of economic success and earned university credentials in increasing numbers, members of subsequent generations in particular often “yearned” to join the Brazilian elite and, perhaps, to “lead” it (69). Although they established themselves as farmers in Brazil as opposed to *mascates* (peddlers) or shopkeepers, the experience of Temer's family upon arrival from Lebanon in the 1920s speaks to a typical trajectory, with Michel—born in São Paulo's interior in 1940—studying and then practicing law before entering politics (150–151, 158). Such is the extent of Arab Brazilian involvement in São Paulo politics in particular that Bercito remarks that the city “sometimes looks like Beirut during electoral campaigns” (115).

Temer's story—one of several that is told here—also evokes the transnational impacts of Arab immigration to Brazil, a topic about which relatively little has been written. Indeed, as a former journalist (and current doctoral student in history) from Brazil who speaks Arabic and reported from numerous Middle Eastern locales, Bercito—who also explores his own family's potential ancestral link to the region in this book—is well situated not only to present the narratives of Temer, former São Paulo mayor and 2018 presidential candidate Haddad (of both Syrian and Lebanese descent), and others. He is also well positioned to highlight the impacts of these migratory flows on the Levant itself. Here, Bercito recounts visiting the Temer family's hometown of Btaaboura, some seventy kilometers north of Beirut, and one of many Christian-majority villages in a “forgotten” region that saw much of its population leave for the Americas between the late 1800s and early 1900s (150–154). In many such villages, the Portuguese of the immigrants who returned (*brasilibaneses*) is a veritable lingua franca, as he observes (205, 230). These are certainly sites and populations about which further research is needed. Bercito also usefully highlights the extent to which immigrants commonly remained involved in the political affairs of their home countries (186) and recounts the efforts—at times unsuccessful—of Arab Brazilians who traveled to the region to search for distant relatives (215).

Given the intended audience, the author does not delineate the contours of the community's “path to politics” in great detail or seek to make conceptual or theoretical contributions. Nonetheless, specialists will still find this text to be of interest, particularly for its discussion of the aforementioned transnational dynamics and its excavation of various forms of diversity within the Arab Brazilian population that often go unacknowledged—for example, the existence of a largely “forgotten” class of intellectuals, artists, and writers (77–90), past and present religious affiliations (91–99), and the role and protagonism of women (192–201).

In *Peronism as a Big Tent*, Rein and Noyjovich pursue a related matter in more granular (and historical) terms, focusing on the political incorporation of Arab Argentines during what they call the “Peronist decade,” from 1945 to 1955 (3). Per their recounted estimates, approximately one hundred thousand Arabic-speaking immigrants from Greater Syria settled in Argentina by 1917, mostly in its northwestern provinces (18). Rein is a

⁹ See, respectively, Oswaldo Truzzi, *Patrícios: Sírios e libaneses em São Paulo* (São Paulo: Hucitec, 1997), which recently appeared in English translation as *Syrian and Lebanese Patrícios in São Paulo: From the Levant to Brazil* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018); John Tofik Karam, *Another Arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007).

well-known, Israel-based historian who has written extensively on Argentina's substantial Jewish population, the largest in Latin America. The present text—a recent English translation of the Spanish version, of which his fellow historian Noyjovich is coauthor—complements his earlier single-authored book on the experiences of Jewish Argentines under Peronism.¹⁰ Although the topic is not pursued at great length in the former, evocative comparisons of these two infrequently juxtaposed immigrant groups do make occasional appearances (17, 43, 58, 78).

The authors' core argument is that these years featured a shift toward a more "participatory model of democracy" in which the Argentine state relaxed naturalization laws and promoted increasingly inclusive notions of citizenship, identity, and belonging that deliberately fostered political participation (and leadership) by Arab Argentines, as well as by those from other minority groups (3, 11, 30). They write: "Perón's government substituted the traditional model of the melting pot by granting greater legitimacy to hybrid identities and emphasizing the broad range of cultural matrices at the base of Argentine society" (3). Invoking what would later be termed *transnationalism*, Perón is cited here—in numerous quotations of interest—lauding Arab Argentines not only for their "assimilative power" but also for maintaining linkages to their homelands (10, 12, 44, 45). It was, of course, precisely this notion of simultaneous loyalty that had long prompted suspicion toward immigrants in Argentina and elsewhere, with earlier press commentary expressing fear that the country was becoming a "Semitic republic" (12, 25).

This shift certainly produced political rewards, at least for a time, as it mobilized a significant portion of the leadership of many diaspora communities in favor of Peronist rule. In turn, it is recounted that, although no Arab Argentines had previously been elected to the national congress, by 1948, they comprised one of every eight Peronist representatives therein (6, 69). As Rein and Noyjovich observe, this arc of incorporation culminated with the 1989 election to the presidency of Carlos Menem, who was born in the small northwestern Argentine village of Anillaco to a Syrian Muslim family but subsequently converted to Catholicism (6). However, the fact that he was often aloof from the concerns of many coethnics—given, for example, his prioritization of ties with Israel over the Arab world—renders him an ambiguous figure in this regard, even if his earlier, unsuccessful facilitation of the building of a large mosque in Buenos Aires would later come to fruition, in 2000 (169–182).

Read through Rein and Noyjovich, Perón's posture toward immigrant communities appears laudably progressive. Yet as they also recognize, Perón's embrace of Arab Argentines and others was conditional on their political support (12–13), and he perceived their ability to cultivate ties with the Arab world as beneficial for his "Third Position" foreign policy (49, 63, 80, 100). For their part, Arab Argentines largely eschewed Perón after his 1955 overthrow, also for political reasons (166–167). Naturally, the ecumenical tendencies usefully documented in this text need to be reconciled with Perón's fascist sympathies, a topic that is only hinted at here (48, 76). A more critical account would also call into question the extent to which Peronism was truly "open[] to all matters related to the interaction between ethnicity and nationality" (139), especially given the ongoing and systematic denial of the African and indigenous roots of "contemporary, multicultural Argentina" (11). The recasting of Perón's first administrations as relatively successful incubators of immigrant incorporation (at least for some) makes this an important contribution to our understanding of the sociopolitical trajectories of Argentina's large Arab diaspora, but the Peronist "tent" is perhaps not so capacious as the authors suggest.

¹⁰ Respectively, Raanan Rein and Ariel Noyjovich, *Los muchachos peronistas árabes: Los argentinos árabes y el apoyo al Justicialismo* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2018), and Raanan Rein, *Los muchachos peronistas judíos: Los argentinos judíos y el apoyo al Justicialismo* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2015).

Integration and its limits

A less optimistic story materializes in *Manifold Destiny*, which interrogates the illiberal policies enacted by the Argentine, Brazilian, and Paraguayan governments—disquietingly consistent across periods of authoritarian and democratic rule—to surveil and police the Triple Frontier’s sizable, economically significant, and highly transnational Arab population. Although Karam does not provide precise demographic figures, of note is that the local Arab community is relatively new—with significant waves beginning to arrive in the 1970s—and also majority Muslim (of these, just over half are Shia), a rarity in the region (16). Between the area’s demographics, its status as a commercial hub frequently visited by Brazilians who cross into Paraguay to shop at “mostly Arab-owned” stores (43, 126), and its frequent invocation as a key site of suspicion in the Global War on Terror, the Triple Frontier comprises a fascinating—if understudied—space, and it is to his credit that Karam casts sorely needed light on it.

As a trailblazing anthropologist who has made profound contributions to the rise of Arab–Latin American scholarship and to the globalization of Latin American (and Middle Eastern) Studies more generally, Karam—who hails from a Lebanese-Brazilian-US “diasporic family”—is well situated to tease out the complex, transnational dynamics that unfold at this “hemispheric crossroads” (1, 4–9, 21–22). To do so, he draws from an impressive array of archival materials, interviews, and fieldwork-based observations, particularly from the area’s largest cities: Paraguay’s Ciudad del Este and Brazil’s adjacent Foz do Iguaçu (18).

Two core assertions emerge from Karam’s analysis. First, *Manifold Destiny* reveals the dramatic extent to which regional governments, often goaded by Washington and not without some pushback by local officials, have regularly sought to “securitize” the tri-border area and its Arab population (173–200). This dynamic has generally intensified under the governments that replaced Cold War-era dictatorships, despite their self-avowed democratic credentials and the 1991 founding of a regional trade bloc, Mercosur, that was to liberalize flows of capital, goods, services, and people, but that also led to border militarization (120, 170).

What Karam uncovers is a “hemispheric history of exceptional rule” lasting over six decades, during which “Arabs came to terms with governmental suspensions of rules and rights” (3, 8). Though serving as “agents of development,” Arabs could never escape suspicion of “double-dealing,” “economic duplicity,” and illegality (53). In response, Karam highlights Arab agency as they “folded into and took ownership of this semiperipheral America” (4, 41), including through serving as a cross-border “free trade vanguard” (133), and via the Peace without Borders movement (154–159). But he is also careful to highlight tensions among Arabs and between Arab groups (159), the limits of activist responses (55), and the community’s desire to avoid antagonizing authorities—dictatorial and otherwise—so that they could continue “doing business” (35, 195).

Second, Karam tackles long-standing suspicions concerning terrorist activity (33, 48), which intensified after horrific and highly lethal attacks against the Israeli embassy and a local Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s (95) and, subsequently, on September 11, 2001 (146–154). Responding to the definitive “lack of research” concerning this topic, Karam writes categorically that US-led “panic” about the tri-border area has no factual basis, and he cites numerous officials to the same effect (22, 148–149).¹¹ Most memorable was the unsubstantiated accusation—made most famously on CNN, but also by Argentine media and certain US officials—that Osama bin Laden visited the region and that associated “terrorist cells” had a local presence (152, 166, 183). In supposed

¹¹ Beyond the scope of this work’s data sources, it remains unclear what evidence, if any, is contained within US, Latin American, and other intelligence files.

response to these and similar conjectures, the region's Arabs have routinely been "scrutinized" without being "charged," and their due process rights regularly suspended—including by corrupt officials (10, 139, 160). In this context, to be "fully exonerated" appears an impossibility (153). In the book's closing line, Karam observes that Arabs "still await a final verdict" concerning their status within these overlapping national and transnational spaces (212), but *Manifold Destiny* offers little hope that a more inclusive future awaits. What it does present is an empirically rich and theoretically informed account that fills several major scholarly gaps and speaks directly to contemporary political debates.

Numerically, Islam accounts for a relatively minor portion of the Latin American and Caribbean religious mosaic. The same goes for the Arab–Latin American population, most of whom adhere to various forms of Christianity. Nonetheless, as Chitwood argues in *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*—a title that invokes a foundational text about Latin American Jewry—we can fruitfully see "both the Americas and global Islam as two interwoven threads of a much more entangled story than previously told" (3).¹² Hence the stated aim to provide a "corrective" to the "general amnesia" concerning Islam's past and present influence in the regions, which he characterizes as a form of "absent presence"—that is, "often influential" but generally "erased, forgotten, or neglected," including in scholarly accounts (2–3). Although interest in Islam and Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean has grown in recent years, Chitwood's appears to be the first systematic English-language account.¹³ By providing a broad overview of historical and contemporary dynamics—the book's two thematic sections—it serves as a useful scholarly resource and starting point for future research (9).

In the first part, Chitwood—a religious studies scholar and editor in chief of the Latin America and Caribbean Islamic Studies Newsletter—digs into the regions' colonial histories, interrogating (but also analyzing the meaning behind) the recurring but dubious claim that Muslims reached the Americas before Columbus (29–46). He also highlights the migration of Iberian Muslims, as well as the extent to which Spain's "conquest of the Americas was an extension of its war against Muslims in the homeland" (49–71), the trafficking of Muslim African slaves (75–93), and the arrival of significant numbers of Muslim indentured laborers and immigrants (97–122). Especially noteworthy is the case of Suriname, where up to one-third of the population is Muslim—including Javanese, Indo-Pakistanis, Afro-Surinamese, Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians (107). Smaller communities of generally unknown size, also consisting of local converts, exist throughout the hemisphere, as evidenced by the proliferation of mosques and Islamic schools and cultural centers (111–118).¹⁴

Regarding contemporary linkages, Chitwood emphasizes Brazil's status as the world's largest exporter of halal meat (127–147), the role of the Global War on Terror in constructing Islam as a "foreign threat" (citing Karam) and concomitant rise of a "Latin American Orientalism" (151–175), the presence of indigenous Muslim converts in Mexico and beyond (181–199), rival Turkish and Saudi plans (the latter successful) to build a mosque in Havana as part of a struggle for geopolitical influence and "Sunni hegemony" (203–221), and the US "Latinx Muslim" convert population, which numbers in the tens of thousands (223–242).

As revealed, these are regions of "stunning diversity," and considering Islam's place within them helps globalize our understanding of both Islam itself and Latin

¹² Judith Laikin, *The Jews of Latin America*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014).

¹³ María del Mar Logroño Narbona, Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto, and John Tofik Karam, eds., *Crescent over Another Horizon: Islam in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015); Aisha Khan, ed., *Islam and the Americas* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017).

¹⁴ For example, estimates of Brazil's Muslim population range from tens of thousands to one million (136).

America (3, 249). As Chitwood summarizes, “We cannot imagine global Islam without considering the Americas,” and vice versa (144–145). In making this case, the book helpfully undermines the tendency—also captured by Karam—“to frame Muslims as strangers and foreigners in a region they have long been part of, helped to shape and build, and continue to actively participate in” (11).

International (and “South-South”) relations

As noted, interregional political and economic relations have been a recurring topic of scholarly focus. This was especially the case during the early 2000s “left turn,” when Brazil led a regional charge that saw rapidly increasing trade, the first-ever Arab–Latin American summits, and the widespread extension of diplomatic recognition to Palestine. This was the context that gave rise to Tawil Kuri’s earlier edited volume, to which *Latin American Relations with the Middle East* serves as a companion.¹⁵ The latter—coedited with Brun, a fellow Mexico-based political scientist—analyzes the status of Latin American–Middle Eastern ties in a time of overlapping crises, including the post-Arab Spring authoritarian backlash, COVID-19, a global economic slowdown, and the rise of Bolsonaro and other right-wing leaders who have largely rejected the “South-South” alliances of previous years (4–5). Within this convoluted scenario, there is a new normal defined by relations that have seemed, with some exceptions, mostly stagnant at best (3).

The overarching framework of this text is foreign policy analysis, particularly the writings of the Chilean political scientist Alberto van Klaveren, who theorized the dynamic interplay between internal and external forces that condition regional foreign policies (9). Especially compelling empirically focused contributions include Guilherme Casarões and Monique Sochaczewski’s chapter, which links Bolsonaro-era changes to Brazil’s traditional Middle East posture to domestic political maneuvering and a desire to curry favor with fellow Far Right leaders in the United States and Israel (38–55). Sergio Moya Mena documents internal debates that led to the Costa Rican government—unlike Uruguay’s (224)—to refuse to admit Syrian refugees and usefully highlights the extent to which economic interests have generally prevailed in the country’s Middle East policy (118–134). Notably, this has become the norm throughout the region (6). Other Latin American commonalities include the shaping of foreign-policy agendas and outcomes by concentrated presidential power, “external pressure” from the United States and others, and the mobilization of diaspora communities (69, 212).

Fittingly for a volume that features scholars from throughout Latin America, oft-overlooked cases, such as Cuba (140–157) and Uruguay (210–230), receive significant coverage. The coeditors argue that, taken together, the contributions “directly challenge the realist assumption that foreign policy produces outcomes that correspond neatly to the initial preferences of states” (261). In turn, one indeed hopes that this text helps to put “relatively overlooked theorists” such as van Klaveren on the radars of more Northern scholars (9).

Although existing literature commonly presumes that Latin American–Middle Eastern relations are often normatively positive and deeper linkages are generally desirable, Tawil Kuri and Brun add the important caveat that these “South-South” ties—a term that itself requires unpacking—can involve asymmetries, unsavory military cooperation, and investment in deleterious projects (272). Further, the regions may at times be drawn together by shared opposition to the machinations of “Western powers,” but Latin

¹⁵ Marta Tawil Kuri, ed., *Latin American Foreign Policies towards the Middle East: Actors, Contexts, and Trends* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). I contributed a chapter to this volume, entitled: “How Latin America Met the Arab World: Toward a Political Economy of Arab–Latin American Relations.”

American foreign policies toward the Middle East can also be informed by ignorance and “peripheral orientalis[t]” views, as several contributors identify (18, 98, 253).

Among the actors that receive relatively little attention in state-focused approaches to foreign policy are civil society organizations, which are the focus of the open-access volume *Brasil e Oriente Médio*, a publication of the Universidade de São Paulo’s Instituto de Relações Internacionais. As Vasconcelos and Clemesha observe in the introduction, Brazil is a “desirable” partner for many Middle Eastern actors, but one with only a “timid presence” (8). Their purpose is to both analyze the current status of Brazilian civil society’s nascent involvement with the region (currently concentrated in Palestine [73–91]), and to (with a degree of optimism) explore possibilities for—and justify—further engagement in especially receptive places, at least at the time of writing, like Tunisia (94–111).

Given that Brazil is not a global military power, they argue that civil society can be central to its “soft-power” approach and identify this as “the sector of Brazilian society with the greatest capacity for developing cooperative projects with its peers in the Arab world” (10, 14). This is especially the case given that Brazil is often seen as a fellow Global South country that can build horizontal ties that are untainted by colonial and imperial histories and practices (97).

As various contributors argue, what Brazilian civil society has to offer is a track record of fighting poverty and inequality, and promoting postauthoritarian political reform (12). Indeed, before the 2013 coup that brought General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to power, many Egyptian reformers saw Brazil as a “model” for democratization and development (17). Particular Brazilian policy innovations that have had global resonance include conditional cash transfers (namely, the Bolsa Família program) and participatory budgeting (58–59, 101). Brazil has also been widely admired in the region for its (pre-Bolsonaro) support for Palestinian statehood (17).

As Cecilia Baeza writes in her Tunisia-focused chapter, “Brazil is the only emerging country that has managed, at least until 2010, to [achieve] . . . elevated growth rates, significantly reduce poverty, and reduce inequality” (100). The temporal caveat is relevant, given the profound social, political, and economic crises that have afflicted Brazil in the past decade and that cast a shadow over any efforts to become a more impactful global player, through civil society or otherwise. A sanguine take would suggest that Lula will restore Brazil’s past prominence in Middle Eastern affairs, although the domestic and international constraints that he confronts appear far more confining than during his previous administrations. The fact that postauthoritarian Brazil continues to be plagued by racialized inequalities and violence also raises questions about its suitability for emulation (96, 104).

Conclusions

Collectively, these works under review analyze various aspects of Latin America’s multifaceted and evolving relationship with the Middle East, bringing fresh perspectives to familiar themes (e.g., foreign policy, experiences of immigrants) and also exploring less-studied ones (e.g., Islam, securitization of the Triple Frontier). Fortuitously, there now exists an “extensive” and growing body of literature on interregional ties, as noted by Jorge Araneda Tapia (Tawil Kuri and Brun, 65). These sources thus form part of a broader and much-needed push to diversify and globalize our understanding of both geographic areas, as well as the fields dedicated to their study.

Numerous avenues exist for future research. For example, there is by now a significantly greater appreciation for the internal diversity of Arab–Latin American populations, especially in religious terms, but further analysis is needed concerning class and political-economic dynamics. How, for example, have Latin American upper classes

been reshaped by the incorporation of Arab-descendent economic—and not just political—elites? What is the relationship between their political integration, as delineated here, and their increasing accumulation of economic power?¹⁶ In turn, how do less advantaged Arab–Latin Americans relate to their wealthier *brimos*, as well as to the broader social orders of which they are a part?

Second, although these are commonly conceptualized as South–South relations, there has been relatively little accompanying discussion of what exactly sets these ties apart in practice from their North–South or North–North counterparts. Brazil, of course, is not weighed down by the same colonial and imperial baggage in its interactions with the Middle East as the United Kingdom, France, the United States, and others. Yet Brazilian companies have also exported significant amounts of weapons to some of the region’s most repressive regimes.¹⁷ Further, many of the Middle Eastern countries that are currently engaging most actively with Latin America—such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates—are far wealthier than their typical “Southern” peers. How, then, can we make sense of the complexities, ambiguities, nuances, and tensions that underlay the various forms of interregional South–South exchange?¹⁸

Finally, although several of these sources consider transnational dynamics that link the regions, rare are multisited investigations that explore phenomena such as the experiences of Arab immigrants to Latin America who subsequently returned to their home countries (e.g., the aforementioned *brasilibaneses*), the intricacies of cross-border family networks composed of those who stayed and those who left—including the associated “remittance economy” (cited in Karam, 175), and relations and similarities (or differences) between, for example, the Lebanese diaspora in Latin America and their conationals in West Africa. Here, we are reminded again of the need to see Latin America and Latin American Studies as sites of global encounters.

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¹⁶ Kevin Funk, *Rooted Globalism: Arab–Latin American Business Elites and the Politics of Global Imaginaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).

¹⁷ Kevin Funk, “The Political Economy of South America’s Global South Relations: States, Transnational Capital and Social Movements,” *Latin Americanist* 57, no. 1 (2013): 3–20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1557-203X.2012.01182.x>.

¹⁸ Kevin Funk, “The Global South Is Dead, Long Live the Global South! The Intersectionality of Social and Geographic Hierarchies in Global Capitalism,” *New Political Science* 37, no. 4 (2015): 582–603, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2015.1089031>.

Cite this article: Funk, Kevin (2024). Globalizing Latin American Studies: New Frontiers in Latin American–Middle Eastern Exchange. *Latin American Research Review* 59, 503–513. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.41>