
Syro-Lebanese Migration (1880-Present): “Push” and “Pull” Factors



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The earliest examples of modern Lebanese¹ migration date to the 1850s with Anthony al-Bishalani, who migrated to the United States. However, scholars consider the 1880s to be the beginning of a larger migration phenomenon. A few decades after al-Bishalani set foot in America, Michel Chiha asserted that “we could not be able to live without emigration, but if emigration became too vast, it would be the end of us.”² After five waves of emigration, Lebanon today faces just such a dilemma.

THE FIRST WAVE: 1880-1914

According to Charles Issawi, migration from Lebanon to the New World began to intensify during the second half of the 19th century, when Mount Lebanon was the scene of several regional and international conflicts that led to civil wars, notably between Maronite Christians and the Druze in 1840 and 1860.³ After 1861, peace also had its share in promoting migration: Missionaries founded medical dispensaries and schools that helped to reduce mortality and raise the level of education to meet the needs of a flourishing tertiary sector. This led to a demographic boom in the Mount Lebanon area, spurring an “internal exodus,” mainly to Beirut, while the number of educated people outnumbered the available jobs, pushing those who were less educated to seek employment outside Lebanon. Furthermore, Beirut’s population, which had quadrupled between 1830 and 1850, doubled between 1865 and 1920, as a result of the internal exodus from the over-populated Mount Lebanon area.⁴

The Mutasarifiat brought new challenges: The new political regime allowed free trade, which led to an influx of European goods into the Lebanese market. As a result, Mount Lebanon’s economy shifted rapidly from an autarchic regime to enmeshment with the world economy, which required the use of cash whereas Lebanese relied on barter and exchange of goods. Peasants tried to compensate for this deficiency by taking personal loans to buy mulberry trees, necessary for the production of silk — then the backbone of the Lebanese economy, accounting for 82% of Mount Lebanon’s exports.⁵ At that time, 40% of cultivated land was allocated to growing mulberry trees. This resulted in an export-driven monoculture,⁶ and Mount Lebanon had to resort to importing raw foodstuffs such as wheat in a period of demographic expansion and heavy debts. In



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1. The early migration from the Ottoman occupied lands was mainly from Lebanon. However, Lebanese were first registered in official records of ports of entry as Turks, as they held Turkish passports. Therefore, the term “Syro-Lebanese” is the proper term to refer to the pre-Mandate era, taking into account that the majority of migrants originated from modern day Lebanon.

2. Michel Chiha, *Lebanon at Home and Abroad*, Leo Arnold and Jean Montegu, trans. (Beirut: The Publications of the Cenacle, 1966), p. 114.

3. Charles Issawi, “The Historical Background of Lebanese Emigration: 1880-1914,” in Albert H. Hourani and Nadim Shehadi, eds., *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), pp. 13-31.

4. Leila Tarazi-Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut*, Harvard Middle Eastern Studies, No. 18 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 2-3.

5. Akram Khater, “House to Goddess of the House: Gender, Class and Silk in the 19th Century Mount Lebanon,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1996), pp. 326-27.

6. Boutros Labaki, “L’émigration libanaise en fin de période ottomane (1850-1914),” *Hannon Revue Libanaise de Géographie*, Vol. 19 (1987), p. 9.

1890, 18 years after the silk boom, the economy was heavily challenged: A “silk crisis” occurred, as cheaper and better quality Chinese silk products flooded European markets, previously the main destination for Lebanese silk.

This crisis corresponded with the 19th-century coastal revival, “owing to growth of trade with Europe following the industrial revolution and the development of steam navigation.” At least ten steam navigation lines operated regularly from the port of Beirut. Migrants could thus easily go back and forth, carrying home success stories from America and attracting more young, and ambitious but unskilled men seeking wealth and prosperity in the New World.⁷

However, seeking a better life was not the only motive for migration; a large number of young men fled conscription. Hitti asserts that every steamer heading to the Americas was full of young men seeking to avoid military service.⁸ Here Christian residents of the *wilayets* of Beirut, Saida, and Tripoli were the direct targets, as Christians of the Mutassarifiyate were granted a special status guaranteed by the *Règlement Organique*.⁹ “It was like a gold rush,” as steamship agents — usually returning migrants who marketed their success stories in the New World — “recruited passengers for the ships in form of cheap labor for America’s industries.”¹⁰ High-interest credit was offered to those who could not afford to buy a ticket.¹¹

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Red-tiled Italian-style houses were seen all over the mountain; everywhere, signs of prosperity and wealth encouraged young men to emigrate, leading to an “emigration fever.”¹² About 45% of Mount Lebanon’s population is said to have emigrated between 1860 and 1914; Mount Lebanon’s population in 1913 is estimated to have been 468,714.¹³

The irreversible Occidental orientation of Lebanon, as described by Karam Rizk, also was encouraged by the missionary schools, which introduced Western culture to Lebanese society. Meanwhile, foreign languages were taught and spoken in the streets of Beirut,¹⁴ attracting yet more Lebanese youth to the West.

Egypt was the first destination for Syro-Lebanese, who were drawn there by its prosperous economy and the freedom of speech promoted under British tutelage. Later on, two large exhibitions held in Philadelphia in 1876 and in Chicago in 1893 had a significant influence on migration, as the Ottoman Empire favored wider participation and representation of the Sultanate in these exhibitions and therefore encouraged Syro-Lebanese to participate.¹⁵

It was the economic growth in the Americas that had a direct impact on migration: Syro-Lebanese were “pulled” by the opportunities that were offered in the United States, which had the highest growth rate of income per capita among industrial countries (4.3% *per annum*) between 1879 and 1913.¹⁶

7. Tarazi-Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut*, p. 2.

8. Philip Hitti, *The Syrian in America* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1924), p. 51.

9. Abdallah Al-Mallah, “Mount Lebanon Mutassarifiyate Between 1903 and 1915: The Global Political and Sociological Reality,” PhD dissertation, Fanar, Lebanese University, Section II, 1990, p. 11.

10. F. Kleem, “The Cleveland Maronite Lebanese and Education,” PhD dissertation, Cleveland, Ohio, 1986, p. 20, cited in Louis Ferkh, “Conflict and Migration: The Lebanese Emigrants’ Potential Role in the Development of Lebanon,” PhD dissertation, University of Limerick, 1991, p. 84.

11. Hitti, *The Syrian in America*, p. 53.

12. Ferkh, “Conflict and Migration: The Lebanese Emigrants’ Potential Role in the Development of Lebanon,” p. 84.

13. Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues, *La situation démographique du Liban, Analyses et données* (Beirut : publication du Centre de Recherches de l’Institut des Sciences Sociales de l’Université Libanaise, 1974), cited in Boutros Labaki, “*L’émigration libanaise en fin de période ottomane* (1850-1914),” pp. 8, 15.

14. Rev. Karam Rizk, “Vie spirituelle et culturelle au Liban de 1845 à 1870,” *Parole de l’Orient*, Vol. 15 (1988/89), pp. 321-322.

15. Alixa Naff, “Lebanese Immigration into the United States: 1880 to the Present,” in *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration* (Oxford: The Center for Lebanese Studies, 1922), p. 144.

16. Boutros Labaki, “*L’émigration libanaise en fin de période ottomane* (1850-1914),” p. 14.

The rubber boom in Brazil also attracted migrants in the 1890s. Demography was an essential catalyst, as the underpopulated American continent offered opportunities for both skilled and unskilled migrants. In Brazil, the abolition of slavery allowed Lebanese to find work as peddlers, selling goods in the Brazilian hinterlands.¹⁷

Freedom of speech also was an essential “pull” factor — attracting immigrants to the United States, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, and other Latin American countries. Lebanese migrants, according to Hitti, “hardly [...] fail to refer to [their] desire [...] to live [a] life free and unhampered from political restraints as the chief motive for [their] coming into the United States.”¹⁸ This could be the reason behind the founding of several Arabic magazines in the New World addressing Mount Lebanon and issues of the homeland. The number of newspapers and magazines surpassed that in the Mutasarifiat.¹⁹ Chiha attributes Syro-Lebanese emigration to “the ingenuity of the Near Easterner [which] is a basic element in his assets — an integral part of his stock-in-trade; and this ingenuity becomes effective only outside or above regulations and restraint.”²⁰

This first wave of Syro-Lebanese immigrants — most of whom were illiterate, unskilled, and single males — remitted large sums of money that helped balance Mount Lebanon’s economy and contributed to the decongestion of the cities by reducing the toll of unemployment — the direct outcome of rural exodus.

THE SECOND WAVE: 1915-1945

The First World War sea blockade halted emigration for three years (1915-18), but the outflow of Lebanese resumed as soon as the war ended. Emigration continued until the third quarter of 1920 and the proclamation of the French Mandate over Lebanon. Thereafter, a series of factors dramatically reduced the number of emigrants: the US quota for immigration, the stability brought to Lebanon by the French Mandate, and the international economic crisis — the Great Depression — that swept through the United States and Europe. The French Higher Commissioners report a significant number of returnees in 1924, 1927, and 1928.²¹ This new trend, however, did not last. The year 1925 saw an increase in migration, as the Druze insurrection in Syria quickly spread to Lebanon and resulted in clashes, notably in the Christian Beqaa town of Rashaya. These incidents reminded the Christians of the 1840 and 1860 massacres. It also undermined their trust in the French Mandatory powers to help them secure an independent Lebanese entity. Lebanon’s economy continued to suffer from the destruction and high mortality rate of the First World War. Meanwhile, France faced an enormous economic crisis. These circumstances prevented investment in the building of Lebanon’s economy and attracting successful Lebanese migrant capitalists.

This wave of migration included a significant increase in the number of women, who departed primarily for purposes of family reunion. This wave also included new destinations for Lebanese migrants, such as Australia and West Africa.

THE THIRD WAVE: 1943-1975

Although migration waned immediately after Lebanon achieved independence, this trend did not prevail. Starting in

17. Jeff Lesser, “From Peddlars to Proprietors: Lebanese, Syrian and Jewish Immigrants to Brazil,” in *The Lebanese in the World*, pp. 395-401.

18. Hitti, *The Syrian in America*, p. 51.

19. Hitti, *The Syrian in America*, p. 135.

20. Chiha, *Lebanon at Home and Abroad*, p. 119.

21. M.A.E., *rapport à la SDN pour l’année 1927*, p. 53. M.A.E., *rapport à la SDN pour l’année 1925*, p. 95. M.A.E., *rapport à la SDN pour l’année 1927*, p. 89. M.A.E., *rapport à la SDN pour l’année 1928*, p. 94.

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the 1950s, political unrest, a high cost of living, and a high rate of unemployment drove more Lebanese to emigrate. Further spurring emigration were the 1956 Suez crisis, political persecution, discrimination following the unsuccessful coup attempt by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and Israel's daily raids in South Lebanon in an attempt to crush Palestinian guerrillas attacking northern Israel.

As a result of instability, 164,000 Lebanese fled the country between 1973 and 1974: 72,000 to the Arab countries, 64,000 to Europe, 21,000 to the United States, 1,600 to Australia, 61,000 to Africa, and 17,000 to Asian countries.²²

Yet, despite the amplitude of the number of migrants in 1973-1974, emigration during this period was far less impressive than the first wave. At the same time, the migrants' profile changed significantly: Young men and women seeking better education migrated to the United States, Canada, and Europe, while those who sought employment opportunities migrated to the Gulf in the "oil boom" era.²³

THE FOURTH WAVE: 1975-1990

During this 15-year period, which was marked by civil war, approximately one million Lebanese fled the country.²⁴ Labaki asserts that at the beginning of the civil war, most migrants returned as soon as the situation returned somewhat to normalcy (in 1976), while a large number continued to go back and forth. After 1985, however, migration became permanent.²⁵

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It is not surprising that war and its effects were the major "push" factors during this period. According to the Centre Catholique d'Information, over 800,000 families were displaced.²⁶ This massive internal movement was followed by an economic crisis, the devaluation of the Lebanese lira, and a dramatic rise in the unemployment rate, which reached 35% in 1987.²⁷ The breakdown of the educational system prompted youth and family migration, as Lebanese families traditionally accorded great importance to education.²⁸

Reunion Acts pulled many families to join their relatives abroad. However, terrorist attacks in Beirut led to worldwide scrutiny of all Lebanese; consequently, visa procedures became much more difficult. This prompted all those who had relocated temporarily to work to acquire new nationalities in their host countries. Lebanon thus lost these migrants for good.²⁹

THE FIFTH WAVE: 1990-PRESENT

Nowadays, Lebanese migration is mainly a process of "brain drain" whereby the most educated men and women seek better jobs and opportunities abroad. During the period of Syrian hegemony over Lebanon (1990-2005), corruption, inflation, an increase in public debt, and political persecution prevented many Lebanese from returning and prompted many among those who had stayed to leave. Unemployment gutted the middle class, which adversely affected the Lebanese economy as a whole. Twenty-eight percent of Lebanese families lived below the absolute poverty line.³⁰ Meanwhile,

22. *Al-Minbar*, No. 49, March 1990, p. 16.

23. Nabil Harfouch, *The Lebanese in the World, Documents and Censuses*, Vol. III, Beirut, 1978, p. 24.

24. Ferkh, "Conflict and Migration: The Lebanese Emigrants' Potential Role in the Development of Lebanon," p. 88.

25. Boutros Labaki, "*L'émigration libanaise en fin de période ottomane (1850-1914)*," p. 607.

26. Joseph Khoreich, *Results of the Lebanese War 1975-1997*, Liban, Centre Catholique d'Information, p. 7.

27. Salim Nasr, "The Political Economy of the Lebanese Conflict," in Nadim Shehadi and Bridget Harney, eds., *Politics and the Economy in Lebanon* (Oxford: The Center for Lebanese Studies, 1989), pp. 42-50.

28. Ferkh, "Conflict and Migration: The Lebanese Emigrants' Potential Role in the Development of Lebanon," pp. 90-95.

29. Ferkh, "Conflict and Migration: The Lebanese Emigrants' Potential Role in the Development of Lebanon," p. 100.

30. Antoine Haddad, "The Poor in Lebanon," *The Lebanon Report*, No. 3 (1996), p. 1.

each year, 50,000 new job seekers competed in the Lebanese labor market for 35,000 new jobs.³¹

The repeated Hizbullah/Israel clashes resulted in continuous political and security unrest. The most recent conflict, which occurred in 2006, sowed doubt among young men and women that a safe and prosperous Lebanon was achievable. In her latest field research, Choghig Kasparian demonstrates that obtaining work motivates 52.4% of those who decide to migrate, education 8.8%, family reasons 25.4%, and other factors, including security and politics 13.4%.³² The proportion of men who have migrated (22.9%) is slightly more than double that of women (11.5%),³³ which is widening the demographic gap between the sexes.

Recently, the Lebanese government has devoted more attention to immigrants' needs. Lebanese politicians are constantly making visits to the *Mahjar* (Arab diaspora), taking into account that the remittances are undoubtedly the strongest bulwark against the collapse of the Lebanese economy in the face of the worldwide economic crisis.

With the lack of legislation favoring investments by migrants in Lebanon, this chain of support from remittances can be easily broken, once the family ties are lost, notably as families relocate to the West, Australia, and even Africa. Some migration specialists claim that this trend is not applicable to the majority of Lebanese migrants to the Gulf, as it is a short-term migration with no possibility of permanent residence. However, the latest trends show that a large number of those in the Gulf are seeking re-emigration to the West in the light of the ongoing corruption and instability in Lebanon. Thus far, Lebanon has failed to reverse the Brain Drain and convert it to a Brain Gain. The departure of many of the best and brightest Lebanese men and women is mortgaging the country's future.

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31. Kamal Hamdan, "Economist Slams Policies," *Alternative-Online*, Lebanon, Vol. 1, No. 7 (2003), p. 3A.

32. Choghig Kasparian, "Les jeunes libanais dans la vague d'émigration de 1992-2007," *L'émigration des jeunes libanais et leurs projets d'avenir*, Vol. 2, PUFJ (2009), p. 24.

33. Kasparian, "Les jeunes libanais dans la vague d'émigration de 1992-2007," p. 15.