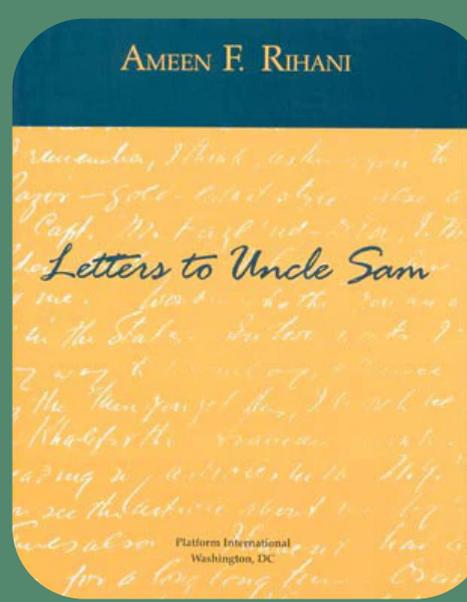




Ameen Rihani (1876-1940). Photo Credits: [al-Funun](#)



Letters to Uncle Same - Cover Photo Credits: [Ameen Rihani Organization](#)

# ‘Vivas on the side for Syria Libre’ Ameen Rihani’s Political Activities as told by Letters to Uncle Sam (1917-1919)<sup>[1]</sup>

Lily Columbus Glaser

In Completion of an Internship with the Lebanese Emigration Research Center at  
Notre Dame University- Louaize

# Forward



Ameen Rihani in Central Park, 1911. Photo Credits: [Ameen Rihani Organization](#)

In his *Letters to Uncle Sam* Ameen Rihani portrayed himself in the years 1917-1919 as an adoptive son of the American people. In the name of hundreds of thousands of other immigrants from the Middle East, he called on the Arab diaspora in the United States to rally around the Entente during the Great War and thus promote the cause of Syrian independence from the Ottoman Empire and German hegemony. Initiated with the entry of the United States into war in 1917, the 'Letters' offer a much-needed insight into the thinking of the literary, social, and political diaspora in New York and their attempt to not only influence the US government but also to find a unique voice in the New World. Published posthumously in 2001, this book provides evidence of the role that immigrant communities play in international relations and how Rihani and the Syrian-Lebanese League of Liberation were a prime example of this significant development.

The Lebanese Emigration Research Center's internship program offers local and international students the opportunity to study issues related to the Lebanese diaspora and their ties to the homeland. Through a joint internship agreement with the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures at Barnard College at Columbia University, Lily Glaser worked under my supervision on this report on Rihani in the years 2023 and 2024. She also worked onsite at the Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies at North Carolina State University, making use of their vast collection of documents on the topic.

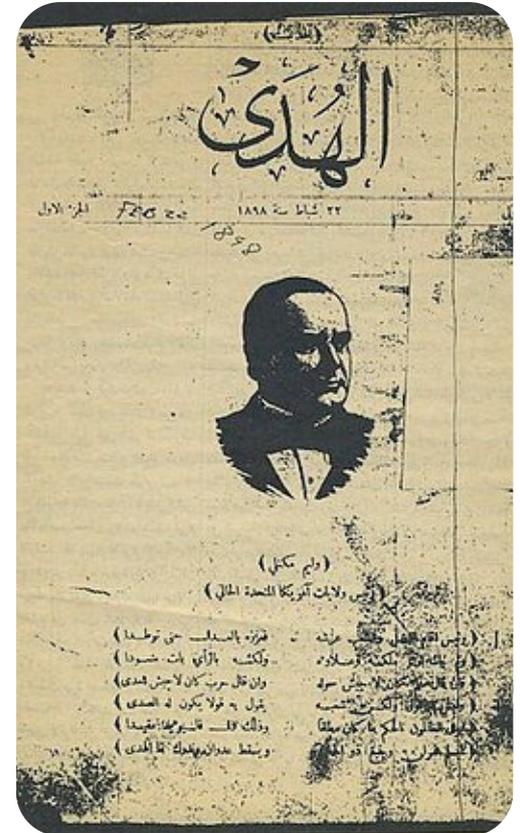
In “Vivas on the side for Syria Libre”, Glaser deals with the manner in which Rihani was able to leverage his leadership position within the diaspora in New York to build ties throughout North America and the Middle East. She describes the gradual transition from support for Ottoman reform, to Syrian autonomy, and ultimately to the debate on Syrian and Lebanese independence, towards the end of the First World War. However, at the beginning of 1917 Rihani had a more urgent agenda. British interception of the ‘Zimmermann Telegram’ in January of this year provided the Syrian-Lebanese League of Liberation with a golden opportunity to prove their value to Uncle Sam. In the ‘Zimmermann Telegram’ the German attempt to bring Mexico into the war effort on the side of the Central Powers – should the US join the Entente – exposed a direct external threat to the United States. Its interception and disclosure meant that the Arab diaspora in Mexico could play an important role in either hampering or supporting the United States during the war. Rihani’s freelance travels to Mexico in the unsolicited service of Uncle Sam, documented in the ‘Letters’, is a prime example of the role played by diaspora communities in shaping and carrying out grassroots international relations from the bottom up.

This study illustrates how the Lebanese and Syrian communities in North America and the Middle East can play an active and productive role in shaping the international relations in both regions. Considering the crossroads at which we find ourselves today, the ‘Letters’ not only document the successes of the past, but also illuminate the potential path ahead. The tedious and painstaking work in historical archives on both sides of the Atlantic can bear fruit for both academics and activists in troubled times. LERC is dedicated to working with scholars, and particularly the younger generation, in serving our community in the diaspora and at home.

Prof. Dr. Eugene Richard Sensenig, Director LERC

## The Mahjar, Ameen Rihani, and a Transnational Political Field

Between 1880 and 1914, the prospect of economic opportunity brought 300,000 people from Greater Syria to locations dispersed throughout North and South America<sup>[2]</sup>. This marked the first wave of migration abroad establishing the *Mahjar*, meaning the Syrian diaspora, or “a place of settlement.” While each Mahjar population had distinctive qualities based on their place of settlement, the Mahjar was united by common experience, shared place of origin, language and culture. Continuous relocation across Mahjar communities, and the proliferation of Arabic-language newspapers, charity organizations, and political parties forged lasting connections among migrants.



Cover page of the first issue of "Al-Hoda" 22 February 1898.  
Photo Credits: [Public Domain, Wikipedia Entry](#)

Major points of settlement for the Mahjar included New York—which was often referred to as the “Mother Colony”— Buenos Aires, and São Paulo, each of which were home to major printing presses<sup>[3]</sup>. The Arabic newspapers printed across settlement cities served as medium to organize and connect political actions across the Mahjar and to Greater Syria, and now serve as an invaluable historical record<sup>[4]</sup>.

Although Greater Syria did not consist of a nation state at the time, the communities scattered geographically were unified based on shared origin and experience. While scholars offer differing timelines regarding the formation of a national identity, the historical record largely agrees that the Mahjar shared a common interest in the affairs of the home country.

Alix Naff and other early Arab-American historians maintain that the Mahjar were apolitical prior to World War I; however, the vision of Greater Syria's self-determination abroad meant that Mahjar communities were eager to mobilize, widespread in their political organizing, and, by 1916, committed to the dissolution of the Ottoman yoke<sup>[5]</sup>.

Among the most politically-active members of the Mahjar was writer, journalist, and intellectual Ameen Rihani (1876-1940), also known as the "***Philosopher of Freike.***"

Rihani was well-known for his humanist philosophy and dedication to bridging East and West. Rihani was born in the village of Freike on Mount Lebanon and migrated to the United States with his family at the age of eleven, becoming a naturalized American citizen in 1903. My study examines Ameen Rihani's transnational activism within the Mahjar, focusing on his efforts to secure American intervention in World War I to support Syrian independence.

Drawing from the works of scholars Hani Bawardi and Stacy Fahrenthold, I explore Rihani's influence on Mahjar political organizing in Mexico and the United States, and the strategies he used to appeal to the (potential) readers of his *Letters to Uncle Sam*, in order to align Syrian and American interests. Through varied efforts, Rihani worked tirelessly to position the Ottoman Turks as a wartime adversary and advocate for Syrian liberation through U.S. intervention. His lifetime of organizing highlights the political nature of the Syrian diaspora and the critical role of transnational strategies in Mahjar activism.

## Rethinking Mahjar with Ameen Rihani

The historian Stacy Farenthold cites Jamal Pasha's execution of Arabist activists as a turning point in public perception of the Ottoman empire, turning the tide from reform driven to support for separatist independence movements both domestically and abroad. I use Farenthold's essay, "Making Nations, in the Mahjar: Syrian and Lebanese Long-Distance Nationalisms in New York City, São Paulo, and Buenos Aires, 1913 - 1929" to examine the Mahjar as a transnational movement, interconnected across places of settlement and decidedly independence-driven in its efforts<sup>[6]</sup>.

Additionally, in her essay, "Former Ottomans in the ranks: pro-Entente military recruitment among Syrians in the Americas, 1916 - 18," Farenthold's research examines how activists advocated for civilian enlistment with Entente armies as a method to gain independence. She draws from newspapers and accounts of clandestine recruitment efforts, which led to the enlistment of 10,000 Syrians into the United States army by 1918, as well as the smaller numbers in the League d'Orient and the Canadian Armed Forces<sup>[7]</sup>. In creating the Syria – Mount Lebanon League of Liberation, Rihani's organizing tactics and pro – Western ideologies aligned with the vision of the League d'Orient laid forth by Farenthold. Farenthold's research contextualizes Rihani's own recruitment efforts within a greater Mahjar movement – all in pursuit of achieving Syrian independence.

In "The Making of Arab Americans: From Syrian Nationalism to U.S. Citizenship," the scholar Hani Bawardi traces the growth of Syrian nationalism in the United States, tracking the formation of Arab political parties in the United States through the 1960s. Bawardi argues that with the *Arab Nahdah*, or "awakening," Syrian immigrants brought their political awareness with them—even as people left their nation of origin, their nationalism ***traveled with them***.

I use Bawardi's scholarship to understand Rihani's role as a pro "Americanist" and situate his organizing efforts amongst other Mahjar Arab nationalists in the United States and beyond. Bawardi explores Rihani's humanistic attitudes and emphasis on promoting religious tolerance, as well as his role in the political debates unfolding in Mahjar newspapers of the time.

Bawardi sets up the discussion of *Letters to Uncle Sam* by identifying the potential that Syrian, Lebanese, and Arab nationalists in the United States saw in the promises of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points. Written in 1918, Wilson's doctrine vowed to fight for the "liberation of nations and oppressed peoples around the world...<sup>[8]</sup>"

Bawardi writes that activists, "saw an opportunity of a peace dividend encouraged, albeit prematurely, in Woodrow Wilson's ideas of self-determination, on the victors' terms, especially since the U.S. role in the war was viewed as benign and non-colonialist."<sup>[9]</sup> This promise sparked mobilization among political organizations to recruit fighters for the United States army. Many *Mahjar* organizers believed that a demonstrated Arab commitment to American interests would win the favor of American politicians, who could then assist in Syrian liberation efforts.

## “Becoming Syrian”

Until 1918, the migrants from Greater Syria were processed abroad as subjects of the Ottoman empire. The majority of Syrians arriving in the US were classified as coming from “Turkey in Asia.”<sup>[10]</sup> Usage of nationality signifiers, such as “Syrian” and “Lebanese,” underscore the complexities of Syrian migrant identity from arrival in the 1880s through WWI. Over time, these titles became associated with the development of different national and political movements<sup>[11]</sup>. Sarah Gualtieri argues in “Between White and Arab” that the term “Syrian” was often used to differentiate between migrant of Christian heritage and other immigrants from the Ottoman Empire, which were assumed to be Muslim<sup>[12]</sup>. In “Becoming ‘Syrian’ in American” Akram Khater, writes that the process of emigration and meeting the U.S. border patrol was the first time that “Syrian” was used as an identifier, as it was less politically charged from “Turk.”<sup>[13]</sup> Going into WWI, naming and self-identification were to become important signifiers of political visions.

### **Decentralization, The Arab Conference in Paris, Separatism, and Pan-Syrianism**

It was not until 1911 that Rihani began differentiating his Arab identity from his Ottoman one<sup>[14]</sup>. Prior to the outbreak of WWI, Rihani along with the majority of Mahjar individuals, advocated for reform and decentralization within the Ottoman empire. Nevertheless, during a period of return to Mount Lebanon between 1905-1910, his critique of the Ottoman government in his play *Abdel Hamid in Astana* and speech “The Great City,” already forced him to flee to Paris<sup>[15]</sup>. Additionally, Rihani’s activities, including his alleged participation in the First Arab Conference in Paris in 1913, were based on increasing the rights, stature, and representation of the Arab provinces. However, after the Ottoman Empire declared war and Jamal Pasha’s execution of Arab nationalists in Damascus and Beirut, hopes of reformation were lost. The Arab nationalist undercurrents bubbling throughout Greater Syria, Egypt, France, and the Mahjar erupted in the fight for separation and independence.

## Separatism, But How?

In the pages of the Mahjar press, intellectuals and activists debated and organized around different views of post-independence Greater Syria ranging from Syrianist, Lebanist, and Pan-Arab. One such effort was led by Shukri Ghanem, the founder of the *Nahda Lubnaniya*, a transnational political organization founded by Naoum Mokarzal. Initially, the *Nahda Lubnaniya* was a pan-Syrianist movement that saw Lebanon as “Syria’s heart,” while envisioning an independent greater Syria under the guiding hand of France<sup>[16]</sup>. In 1916 Ghanem, intensively lobbied the French government to form the *League D’Orient*, a troop open to volunteers from Syria and Armenia, to fight alongside the French army in specific geographic locations. Ghanem, hoped that creating this fighting troop would help achieve his vision of creating a Syria that stretch from the Taurus mountains to the Suez, from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean Sea<sup>[17]</sup>.

The pro-French nature of the League d’Orient was controversial amongst Mahjar activists. To some, it was too pro-colonial; to others, the fact that France did not support an independent Lebanon was cause for concern. The controversy regarding the question of Lebanese independence even led to the end of the partnership between Ghanem and Moukarzel, due to their differing views on Lebanon and Syria. Nevertheless, Ghanem ran major recruitment efforts throughout the Americas. He sent multiple delegates to all the Syrian colonies in South America, funded by his political party, the Comité Central Syrien (CCS).

## Fund Remittance: From the “Mother Colony” to the Motherland

In 1917, as WWI was raging and recruitment efforts were in full swing, famine in Greater Syria posed a grave and rapidly-worsening humanitarian crisis. In response to widespread malnourishment numerous charity organizations abroad were founded in order to remit funds to greater Syria.

The Syrian-Lebanese League of Liberation, affiliated with Ghanem's CCS and headed by Rihani, was one such organization<sup>[18]</sup>. *Letters to Uncle Sam* chronicles Rihani's journey from New York to Mexico to form branches of Leagues of Liberation.

Ameen Rihani rose to significance within the "Mother Colony," i.e. New York City, due to his literary, journalistic, and diplomatic efforts. *Letters to Uncle Sam* (1917-1919) reveals how Rihani framed political activism for Greater Syria as mutually beneficial to both Syria and the United States. His letters shed light on this argument for symbiosis, linking humanitarian efforts and aspirations for independence. It is significant that these six letters are addressed to 'Uncle Sam', the literary figurehead personifying the American federal government and patriotic sentiment at large.

In his letters, Rihani offers an account of efforts as a "missionary," free-lancing on behalf of the United States. By referring to himself with a title that evokes Christian proselytizing, Rihani situates the United States as a place of salvation, and himself as crusader of truth. Notably, Rihani professed a humanist perspective; perhaps, to him, the fight for Syrian self-determination was akin to a sacred obligation. Indeed, Rihani frames his activities to form chapters of Syrian-Lebanese Leagues of Liberation in his letters as motivated by gratitude, indebtedness, and loyalty to fighting on behalf of the United States.

By analyzing the language and rhetoric employed in these letters, I aim to show how Rihani worked to bridge American and Syrian interests by acknowledging the potential of a pro-Ally Syrian population in Mexico that could counter the Mexican labor movement's anti-American stance and counter pro-German propaganda in order to sway America towards supporting Pan-Syrian political organizing.

## **Mexico during WWI**

In January 1917, Germany sent the ‘Zimmermann Telegram’ to its embassy in Mexico, proposing an alliance that would incite war between Mexico and the United States. Germany’s goal was to divert American attention and resources away from supporting the Allies by sparking conflict along the southern border. In the telegram, Germany promised Mexico territory, stating: “we shall make war together and together make peace. We shall give back the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.<sup>[19]</sup>” Despite these provocations, Mexico remained neutral in World War I, largely due to its fear of potential further American incursions into its territorial sovereignty. This made Mexico-American relations a highly sensitive area that required careful diplomatic handling to avoid escalating tensions.

Ameen Rihani, aware of this precarious relationship between Mexico and the United States, framed his efforts to mobilize Syrians in Mexico as a means to reinforce Allied interests and ensure regional stability. By organizing pro-Allied groups, raising funds, and publicly advocating for the Allied cause, Rihani positioned the Leagues of Liberation as a counterweight to German influence in the region. In his view, securing the support of the Syrian community in Mexico would not only benefit the Allies but also act as a protective measure for both American interests and Mexico’s neutrality during the war.

## **The Mexican Mahjar**

Like many of the far-flung Mahjar communities, the migrants in Mexico were mobile and transient, often moving between hubs of Syrian migration. Though migration numbers are extremely variable due to lack of formal record-keeping, scholar Camila Pastor estimates that between 1900-1910, migration was at an all-time high with 5,756 Middle Eastern foreigners registered as living in Mexico alone<sup>[20]</sup>.

The migrant population in Mexico was largely urban, dispersed between Mexico City and other cities on the train lines. The population was marked by structured class division, in which older migrants with more assets often employed newer migrants<sup>[21]</sup>. Like the migration trends of the United States, the mahjari migrants arrived in Mexico and established themselves in trade. Many migrants first made their living by selling goods at street stands or participating in traveling markets. With the accumulation of wealth, they sold fancier goods and entered more competitive industries. Their propensity for trade was attributed to their origins: coming from trade hubs such as Zahle (in the Bekaa Valley), migrants gained the business acumen and experience to succeed<sup>[22]</sup>.

### **On Being a ‘Missionary’**

As discussed in *Letters to Uncle Sam*, the indebtedness and gratitude that Rihani felt toward the United States drove him to work as political, free-lance, “missionary” in Mexico. Considered to be written in 1917, the letters numbered “one” and “four” in the collection document Rihani’s assumption of the “missionary” role and the framing of his actions. Upon hearing that the United States had entered the Great War, Rihani’s initial instinct was to join the army. He wrote to Presidents Roosevelt and Wilson expressing his desire to serve, but both administrations rejected him from military service due to old age. Rihani promptly sought an alternative for achieving the honor of “dying for one’s country.”<sup>[23]</sup> Rihani describes the feeling of dejection that came from not knowing how to help his adopted son. Thus, Rihani was elated after he ran into a Syrian man in a park in New York that had just returned from Mexico, who “had much to tell and much to deplore “touchin’ on and pertaining to the Syrians there.”<sup>[24]</sup> His anger in hearing about some Syrians’ collaboration with Germans, coincided with a sense of purpose.

Rihani had identified a specific problem that he was equipped to fix and thus quelled the “despair in being balked in every effort I made to serve you.<sup>[25]</sup>”

Through a combination of religious and military terminology, Rihani emphasizes the possibilities and flexibility that come from him working independently on behalf of the United States. Proclaiming that he can “bring his native people back to the Faith” without reflecting poorly on the United States government or requiring outside assistance. The other aspect that Rihani focused on was the source of his call to duty coming from what he describes as indebtedness to the nation that like him and “millions of adopted children, fled from old-world tyrannies and tyrants into [America’s] open arms...<sup>[27]</sup>”

Rihani highlights that his individual initiative and drive is like that of other Syrians as well, he stresses that the disloyalty of the Syrians in Mexico comes from the impact of the 500-year Ottoman yoke. The function of framing himself as loyal and motivated by pure causes serves a double purpose. First, to set up his political activities as patriotic and second, to better the reputation of Syrians in the US.

Rihani sought to establish the same level of loyalty and allegiance amongst the Syrians in Mexico, holding his countrymen to the same standards – simply donating to charity or calling oneself pro-Ally was not enough – Rihani demanded action. He stated, “I happen to know them better than the Allied Consuls here and I was determined to put their sentiments and all the material manifestations of it, to the proof... Will they come out openly, bravely, unhesitatingly as a pro-Ally community regardless of the consequences? Will they have the courage to organize a League of Liberation?<sup>[28]</sup>”

Thus, Rihani set up his framework, being pro-ally, and participating in his political organizing was the way to be a valid and loyal American.

## Mexico during WWI

*"Your fields, your hemp and all your ships can wait. Indeed, and they don't give a tinker's dam. If no hemp ever gets to Uncle Sam."<sup>[29]</sup>*

One way that Rihani connected his organizing efforts, and considered them to be beneficial to the United States, was through the discussion of the economic situation in Mexico and its potential consequences for the American government; Rihani features these issues in a lengthy poem, as well as prose, in order to communicate the threat of the labor situation in Mexico for the United States. Rihani first documents the decrease in agricultural productivity that has occurred since the Mexican Revolution and the quality of life under the socialist government, including working regulations, from how many hours can be worked in a day to base income. The main issue that Rihani poses is that the working class in Mexico is not a "fan of the "Colossus of the North" and in Mexico the laborers, and not the government...really control the railways of Yucatan...

"For if you must supply your Allies with wheat, you must first supply your farmers with binder twine to harvest their crops."

During the War, Mexico was a major exporter of twine which the US used to export goods to the Allied powers.

In response to these concerns, Rihani offered a solution rooted in his belief in the economic resilience of the Syrian diaspora. He argued that Syrians, with their "commercial spirit immune to Bolshevism or socialism of any color or shade,<sup>[30]</sup>" could act as allies of capitalism in Mexico. Rihani suggested that Syrians, by nature opposed to socialism, were well-positioned to support American interests and potentially mitigate labor resistance in Mexico that threatened trade with the United States. By presenting the potential function of Syrian migrants, he is priming the U.S. to be more invested in the Syrian cause.

## **The Organization of Syrian-Lebanese Leagues of Liberation and a Run in With the Germans**

In 1917, the Syrian-Lebanese Leagues of Liberation were founded by Ayyub Tabet, Ameen Rihani, and Kahlil Gibran, whose declared mission was to “to seek through French and her allies the liberation of Syria from Turkish rule and to support among the Syrians of Mexico the sacred cause of the Allied Powers.<sup>[31]</sup>” These organizations exemplified the way that the conflicts were intertwined and how Rihani was trying to make the American government align with his view of Syrian independence and act accordingly.

Though Rihani embarked on his mission without officially being assigned that task, he had sought the approval from the American, French, and British embassies to avoid being deemed a threat. As documented in the ‘Letters’ Rihani successfully organized Syrian-Lebanese Leagues of Liberation in Merida, Yucatan, Puebla, and Veracruz. In the Yucatan, the majority of residents were already pro-Ally, but sectarian, village, and personal disputes had kept them from uniting. However, with the guidance of Rihani, “Hundreds of them... yielded, conformed, forgot their local feuds, buried their hatchets and rallied to the bugle call of Freedom...<sup>[32]</sup>”

In this statement Rihani, reflecting his non-sectarian point of view, shows how rallying around the American cause was beneficial in bringing Syrians together.

### **Run in with the Germans**

When the German authorities present in Mexico eventually noticed the presence of Rihani and the effectiveness of his lobbying efforts they sprang into action. The surge of pro-Ally movement threatened the Germans and they sought to put an end to Rihani’s tour in Mexico. Thus, Germans utilized the “disloyal few,” namely Syrian and Lebanese Mexicans sympathetic to their cause, to publish stories in Arabic and Spanish disparaging Rihani and stating that he did not come to Mexico to raise funds for the relief effort, but rather “as a grafter, a blackmailer, a highhanded beggar.<sup>[33]</sup>” Additionally, Germans met with Mexican government officials to sway them to issue an Article 33 pronouncement that expelled Rihani from Mexico.

## The Why?

### **“Syria working for Uncle Sam, Uncle Sam working for France and France working for Syria...The Syrians invariably get the better end of the bargain.”**

In his final letter, Rihani makes a direct appeal to the U.S. government. After outlining the threat that Mexico poses to the United States and the benefits of the organizing work he had done, he poses a two-part question: First, what support will the American government provide to him and the Leagues of Liberation now that he has been deported from Mexico? Second, what will the U.S. do to ensure a favorable outcome for Greater Syria after World War I?

In Letter 4, Rihani recalls an evening spent with what he terms the wealthy "Lebanese" community members. Speaking in a mix of Arabic, French, and Spanish, these influential figures shared their experiences during a bloody period of the Mexican Civil War in 1913.

“Figurez vous,” one of them remarked, “during those ‘Ten Tragic Days,’ every foreigner in Mexico had some government to protect him... except for us Syrians, who were turned away from the French Legation.<sup>[34]</sup>”

Rihani’s use of the term "Lebanese" instead of Syrian reflects a strong pro-French sentiment. In their time of need, the Syrians had sought help from the French government in Mexico, but the French Minister rejected them, claiming ignorance of the "ties of blood and treaty rights" that bound the French and Syrians<sup>[35]</sup>. This rejection led some Syrians to turn to the Germans for support. Notably, though this shift toward the Axis powers was limited to a few individuals, in the eyes of many the entire Syrian community earned a reputation for treason.

In the final letter in the collection, Rihani has already demonstrated the significance of organizing the Syrian community in Mexico. After establishing their value to the United States, he issues a call to action to the U.S. government. He asks pointedly, “To whom do these Syrians belong? And what is your relationship to them now that you are one of the Allies?” Rihani is urging the United States to invest in the Syrian cause and take an active interest in their future.

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## **Conclusion: The Mahjar's Independence Movement**

In conclusion, this exploration has traced Ameen Rihani's contributions to the political organization and transnational activism of the Mahjar, focusing on his efforts to secure Syrian independence through American intervention during World War I.

Rihani's Letters to Uncle Sam, demonstrate his strategic attempts to align Syrian nationalist aspirations with American economic and geopolitical interests. By mobilizing the Syrian diaspora in Mexico and leveraging their economic power and loyalty to Allied causes, Rihani sought to counter German influence in the region and influence U.S. policy in favor of Syrian independence.

Rihani's organizing of the Syrian-Lebanese Leagues of Liberation in Mérida, Yucatán, Puebla, and Veracruz illustrates his adeptness at bridging sectarian divides and uniting diverse Syrian communities under a common goal. His framing of Syrian identity as loyal, pro-Ally, and capitalist positioned the diaspora as critical players in the global war effort, while simultaneously appealing to American ideals of patriotism and democracy. By pointing out Syrian commercial success and their immunity to socialist and Bolshevik ideologies, Rihani presented Syrians in Mexico as reliable partners for the United States, thus tying their future independence to the success of American and Allied wartime goals.

Rihani's efforts to draw the attention of the U.S. government to the potential value of the Syrian diaspora in Mexico, in counteracting anti-American labor movements and pro-German propaganda, illustrate his strategic understanding of transnational politics. His engagement with local economic conditions, particularly the labor unrest in Yucatán and its potential to disrupt American supply chains, highlights how Rihani used economic arguments to bolster his case for U.S. support for Syrian self-determination. By positioning Syrians as vital to maintaining stability on the Southern border, he sought to ensure that their political aspirations would be recognized and supported by the United States after the war.

This study has also demonstrated how Rihani's personal mission of organizing Syrians in Mexico became a broader reflection of the political agency of the Mahjar. His work provides a clear example of how diaspora communities engaged in the global political struggles of their homeland, using their strategic position in North and South America to influence international outcomes. His framing of the Syrian cause in religious and moral terms—as a missionary of truth and liberty on behalf of the United States—reflects his deep personal investment in the Syrian liberation movement and his desire to reconcile his identity as both an American citizen and an advocate for Syrian independence.

Ultimately, this study shows the Mahjar as a politically active and interconnected movement that significantly contributed to the shaping of Syrian nationalist discourse during the early 20th century. Rihani's leadership in the Mahjar exemplifies how diaspora activism played a vital role in shaping both national identity and international politics, as he successfully bridged the interests of his homeland and his adopted country to advocate for the liberation of Greater Syria. His legacy not only sheds light on the political nature of the Mahjar but also underscores the importance of understanding diaspora communities as dynamic participants in the formation of national and global politics.

## About the Author

Lily Glaser, is a graduating senior at Barnard College of Columbia University majoring in Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures. She is interested in mahjar studies and transnationalism. After graduating she will pursue a masters in Middle Eastern Studies.



## About LERC



Founded in 2003, the Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC) was initially established by Notre Dame University (NDU) – Louaize to study emigration from Lebanon over the past 150 years. This included mapping the global Lebanese diaspora and documenting their experiences. LERC also researched foreign nationals and refugees who had resided in Lebanon for a significant period, including Armenians, Palestinians, Iraqis, and Syrians.

The influx of Iraqi refugees in 2003, followed by the displacement and forced emigration during the 2006 Summer War with Israel, and the subsequent arrival of Syrian refugees in 2011, prompted LERC to expand its research focus. This now includes immigration, transit migration, refugee policy implementation, and, as of 2010, foreign domestic workers in Lebanon.

LERC has the largest database of Lebanese emigration and diaspora communities in the Middle East and collaborates with research centers worldwide. LERC's expertise extends beyond Lebanon, with experience carrying out both local and international projects.

## Endnotes

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