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**Review: “More Argentine Than You: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants in Argentina”**

**by Steven Hyland Jr.**

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## **More Argentine Than You: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants in Argentina**

By Steven Hyland Jr., Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017. Pp. 304, Hardback \$65.00, ISBN: 978-0826358776

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### **REVIEWED BY PEDER ØSTEBØ**

For banner-wavering global historians, there are few topics more enticing than migration. Mobility, and especially the transcendence of the borders that traditionally served as the frames of historical narratives, along with the certainty of cultural encounters, has been an endearing research topic for the approach. While global history has provided a fruitful counter-narrative to a traditional ‘assimilationist’ model of migration experiences, the discourse of ‘encounters’ and ‘transcendence’ is not unproblematic. A surging general critique of global history’s failure to address contradictions and complexities within the processes its proponents describe, summarized thoughtfully by Princeton professor Jeremy Adelman, demonstrates the danger of global history spinning into irrelevancy if these problems are not tackled.<sup>1</sup> There is, then, a pressing need for narratives showing complexities and admitting that integration and disintegration are often intertwined. This challenge is perhaps especially acute in narratives of mobility and migration, as the gap between popular discourse and academic discourse is wide when dealing with the topic.

How could such a narrative read like? Steven Hyland Jr., associate professor at Wingate University, might provide a model for how this scholarly exercise might look in his first monograph, *More Argentine Than You: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants in Argentina*. By examining what is widely reckoned to be one of the great success stories of transatlantic migration, he demonstrates that such ‘encounters’ as the one between new residents of the Argentine periphery and the ‘mainstream’ Argentine *populus* are complex, marked by widely different, and often contradictory, tendencies. The background story of the formation of an Arab-Argentine community in Argentina, from arrival in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the verge of a watershed moment of Arab-Argentine political participation in the first Peronist decade (1945–55) thus provides the reader with a balanced insight into migrant community formation and participation.

During the epoch known as the “age of mass migration” (1850–1914) few other countries had a higher ratio of residents born abroad than Argentina. By the eve of World War I, half of the country’s 8 million residents had either migrated to the South American nation themselves or were children of migrants. Although the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Adelman, “What is global history now?,” *Aeon*, March 2, 2017, <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment>.

majority of the country's new residents came from homelands linguistically and culturally similar to the nations of the Southern cone, the migratory patterns were far more diverse than traditional narratives presuppose. The image of a prosperous 'America,' in which the booming agricultural economy of Argentina was one of the main attractions, also appealed to migrants from East Asia, and from the three massive, but decaying empires of Russia, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. Up to 1914, over a hundred thousand people from the area often referred to as 'Greater Syria' (comprising the contemporary states of Syria, Lebanon, the historical lands of Palestine, and parts of Turkey and Iraq), had found their way to Argentine ports.

Although not missing entirely from the scholarly picture, the experiences of the Arab-speaking migrants in Latin America have only in recent years been studied with the vigor and depth they deserve, given the sheer number of migrants residing in the region and their eventual impact on the society which they came to be a part of. More thorough and nuanced analyses of other migration groups, such as those originating from Spain and Italy, has coexisted with a popular narrative of Arab immigration to Argentina as a success story, largely centered around the accumulation of material wealth in the Arab-speaking communities, and a historical notion of Arab-speaking immigrants as bearers of a *espíritu emprendedor* (entrepreneurial spirit). As a contrast to this, Hyland Jr. strives to describe the process of migration and integration as one of complexity, which involves a constant "process of negotiation, influenced by economic cycles, interpersonal networks, time of arrival, place of birth, religious identity, nationalist ideologies, local conditions, and politics of the old country" (p.2).

One of Hyland Jr.'s many achievements is the capacity to dwell on this complexity in all stages of the migratory process. In chapter 1, he provides an in-depth account of the political and social transformations of Greater Syria, then a province of the Ottoman Empire, and the conditions of those who would become part of the migratory exodus. Through an impressive collection of both official data and sources from private archives, Hyland Jr. avoids the traps of push-pull models of migration, in which oversimplification have prevented scholars from recognizing migration as a complex social praxis. By following the trajectory of one young man, Nissim Teubal, from Aleppo, he presents a narrative where global, national, regional, communal, and individual developments intertwine. Cultural changes contributed a legitimization to migration as a possibility; political reform and eventual turmoil lay the ground for a watershed moment for migration in the years after the turn of the century. Perhaps most importantly, the creating and expansion of informational networks facilitated not only an opportunity structure, but also the ideational drive towards the 'new world.'

In the following three chapters (2, 3, and 4), Hyland Jr. describes the initial settlement of Arab-speaking migrants in Argentina. His focus throughout the

book lies on the northwestern province of Tucumán, a part of the country with relatively high immigration from the Ottoman empire, but with a low overall immigration compared to the country as a whole. Although touching upon regional, national and transnational influences in the formation of the community, the in-depth analysis of one province gives the reader a detailed insight into the initial relationship between the new residents and the politico-administrative apparatus. Although Hyland Jr. provides considerable evidence of exclusion and discrimination in this period, he argues that previous studies on this phase have overlooked signs of accommodation: While arrest rates for Arab-speaking immigrants were far higher than for other immigrant groups, Hyland Jr. offers a well-founded review of evidence suggesting that many interacted frequently within the administrative and judicial system to solve both intra- and intercommunal issues (p.60).

The narrative of simultaneous discrimination and accommodation provides a background for a second factor which shaped the trajectory of both individual migrants to and the community in Tucumán. Hyland Jr. holds that both time of arrival, available resources upon arrival and the initial line of work created not a united community, but an economically stratified one. As an engine of the Argentine sugar industry, Tucumán's residents felt both the blessings and curses of an existence contingent on one single, and historically volatile, commodity. This is an important qualifier, as it points to one of the factors contributing to the fragmentation of what was to become the Arab-Argentine community: class stratification. Although the migrants from Greater Syria were diverse in terms of religion and cultural customs, Hyland Jr. holds that class reconfiguration became defining for which place the individual migrant came to find him- or herself in, both in the ethnic community and in the society at large:

... class identities were most important in forging a sense of community among each other. Put differently, a wealthy Maronite Catholic merchant from Mount Lebanon had more in common with a successful Alawite Muslim shop owner from Latakia than with a Maronite day laborer (p.6).

The economic narrative is closely connected to a final overarching process of the Arab-speaking integration: the constant negotiation and renegotiating of the communal self. It is in exploring this process that Hyland Jr.'s mastery of the Arabic language truly bears fruit. In a thorough reading of the debate on identity after the Young Turk rebellion, the collapse of the Ottoman empire, and the eventual establishment of the French mandate of Syria and Lebanon, Hyland Jr. is able to create a narrative in which transnational intellectual debates and local, economic conditions are defining for what was to become the 'Syrian-Lebanese colony' (*colonia siriolibanesa*). The members of this 'colony' managed to carve out a position for themselves as the representatives for the migrant group, even though

influence through this group was reserved for the merchant elite. However, this process was delayed, and at times impeded, by strong disagreements of identity, of ideology, in terms of ideological approaches to the ‘homeland,’ and by interpersonal feuds.

In the final three chapters, Hyland Jr. explores the development of the community in the interwar period, focusing on the institutionalization of the community through entities such as the Syrian-Lebanese Society (chapter 5), the role of women in the community and their influence on social policy and charity (chapter 6), and finally, the increasingly important role of the community in political affairs, first of the communities in which they resided, then on a regional level (chapter 7). As historical research on immigrant communities tends to be male-centered, the author’s treatment on women’s roles in the community is a breath of fresh air, although their role in the economy is not as carefully treated in the previous chapters. Another drawback is that the narrative of economic stratification is not implemented in the chapters on participation. For example, the monograph builds on little research into Arab-speaking migrants in labor movements, with a few notable exemptions in the early stage of the organization in the 1910s. The lack of elaboration on the topic may be a question of the availability of sources. Nevertheless, every author should let the limitations of his source material be known to the readers, especially when dealing with historical entities claiming or seeking group representativity, as is the case of the formation of the Arab-Argentine community.

It is in the chapters on political participation that the pros and cons of a regional case study, instead of a comparative study, are truly revealed. Hyland Jr. notes that in several neighboring provinces, such as Santiago del Estero, the participation rates were higher at an earlier point in time (p.193–4). The author does not, however, elaborate on these differences and their causes, a discussion that would have enriched the material. This point could be extended to other Argentine provinces, where Arab-Argentines eventually would dominate regional politics. During the first decade of Peronism (1945–55), and up until today, Arab-Argentines have been highly influential in the political affairs of the Argentine interior, especially in the provinces of Catamarca, La Rioja, and Neuquén. Which dynamics were in play in the years preceding the political breakthrough of Arab-Argentines, and why did it seem to affect different provinces in a very different way?

More than a criticism of the research in itself, this should be read as a plea to scholars to reflect on their choices in the research process, and to share those with the reader. The research on Arab-Argentines in Latin America is still in its infancy, as is the state of research on many other stories of mobility and migration. Case studies will provide students and scholars with an essential understanding of the multiethnic landscape of the region. In this regard, *More Argentine Than You* stands out as an innovative, nuanced, detailed, and well-researched example. The

processes Steven Hyland Jr. describes, especially through the narrative of fluctuating ethno-national identities, should be of relevance to any scholar or student of migration processes, as are the discussions of socio-economic fragmentation. And, as mentioned in the beginning, the book can provide proponents of the global historical approach with both inspiration and a methodology for approaching research objects of migration looking for the complex patterns, rather than narratives were contradicting patterns and tendencies of disintegration are ignored.